



THE LEFT-HAND PATH:
DISCIPLE
— BOOK IV —
T.S. BARNETT

The Left-Hand Path: Disciple

T.S. Barnett

ALSO BY T.S. BARNETT

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In collaboration with Michelle Kay

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Pensacola, FL

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1

“I don’t like this,” Cora said for what felt like the hundredth time. She sat in the driver’s seat of a stolen car on a dark road in the middle of Philadelphia, trying not to grip the steering wheel too tight. They’d driven all day and into the night to get there from Florida, and the entire way, she’d voiced her disapproval of the plan that she was now too late to stop. Thomas frowned softly at her from the passenger seat but didn’t speak. He’d argued just as much, but in the end, their disagreement hadn’t been enough.

Now Nathan and Elton had disappeared inside the private residence of Gerald Lunsford, the Council Chair of the North American Magistrate. Cora could feel the pressure of the magic barriers around the massive home even as they’d driven up the street, but the two men had taken their time and broken through. It had been too long since then, and too quiet. *Somebody* had to be dead by now—Cora just hoped it was the person they’d intended.

A black sedan roared down the quiet street and skidded to a stop in front of the driveway, and then another screeched into park behind it. Four men poured out of each car and raced up the lawn, but they didn’t make it to the door before a deep thud exploded inside the silent house, shattering an upstairs window and raining glass on the flinching Chasers below.

Nathan's name fell from Cora's lips, but when she put her hand on the door handle, Thomas stopped her with a firm grip on her forearm.

"You can't help them," he said. "They'll come out or they won't."

"But—"

She glanced back at him for a moment, then watched helplessly as the Chasers filed through the front door of the house.

"You'll just die if you go in there," Thomas pressed, and the girl went slack under his hand.

She'd asked them not to go. She'd told them not to. *Begged* them not to. But Nathan was a grenade, set to explode wherever Elton aimed him—and Elton had become a hammer who only saw the Magistrate as a long row of nails. Her pleas had fallen on deaf ears.

Cora pressed against the car window as a sheer blue barrier fell over the house and yard, silencing the shouts and crashes that had begun to sound from inside the house. She waited, fingers curled tight around the handle of the door and flinching at every subtle flash of light that made it through the protective barrier. After an eternity, a crack formed in the blue wall, and it began to slowly fade, dripping away from the top of the dome to reveal the burning house, broken windows, and scorched lawn.

The front door scraped open on broken hinges, and a man's figure appeared in the smoky doorway, but it wasn't until the broader shoulders appeared behind him and the pair stumbled into the driveway that Cora was sure it was Nathan and Elton. Elton was dragging someone behind him by the collar, whom he dropped into a heap at the edge of the yard and left behind without a spare glance. Both he and Nathan were splattered with blood that soaked their clothes and flecked their faces and hair, and Nathan was laughing as he turned to walk a few steps backward and get another look at the house. He stopped Elton with a tap of his knuckles and leaned easily on the taller man's shoulder, leaning in to say something to him that Cora had no chance of hearing.

With one last movement of Nathan's hand, the ground around them shook, and the center of the house gave a terrible crack, tumbling in on itself and sending up a cloud of burning dust. Nathan clapped Elton on the shoulder and walked beside him down to the street, neither of them seeming to hurry.

Cora turned in her seat as they dropped into the back of the car and shut the doors. Nathan lifted his hips to tug his cigarette pack from his pocket

and offered one to the blond beside him, who let him light them both. They'd both taken a long drag and let it out before Nathan's eyes found Cora's anxious face.

"Shouldn't you be driving, my love?" His voice was raspy and strained, but he still offered her a smile. "It's a crime scene, you know."

"That's it?" she asked, almost reaching out to slap the cigarette from his fingers. "That's all you have to say? What the hell happened in there? Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm definitely bleeding out," Nathan laughed, finally wincing as he pressed a hand to a pulsing wound on his side. "All the more reason for you to get a move on, hm?"

"Jesus Christ," she sighed, but she sat back in her seat and turned the key in the ignition, pulling away from the scene just as a pair of flashing blue lights began to turn the corner behind them.

She watched Elton in the rearview mirror, but the only movement he made was to crack the car window so he could tap the ash from his cigarette and blow smoke through the gap. Nathan had always obviously reveled in the chaos he caused, but this new calm post-murder stillness in the former Chaser was unsettling. Whatever was in his head, it certainly didn't seem to be remorse.

She wanted to drive as fast and as far away from the house they'd left behind as possible, but Nathan's head had begun to slump forward in the backseat. Elton had to pluck the cigarette from the other man's hand so that he didn't burn himself, so she pulled off at the first motel she saw outside the city and helped Thomas trade their license plate with another car's while Elton carried Nathan over his shoulder into their room.

"Do you think that helped?" Thomas asked her as they crouched behind the car to attach the stolen plate.

"No," she answered. She pushed herself up by her knees and sighed, hesitant to approach the motel room door. "I'm worried. Elton hasn't said a word. That's creepy, right?"

"I've seen it before," Thomas admitted with a small shake of his head. "I guess he hasn't changed as much as he wants everyone to think." He tilted his chin toward the door. "We'd better stitch Moore up, unless you want him to really bleed out."

Cora nodded, and together they made their way into the room to tend to their injured companions.

She didn't sleep well. Nathan was still as the dead beside her, as usual, but Thomas had preferred a blanket on the floor to sharing a bed with Elton, so she hadn't dared to get up and disturb him. She just laid under the blanket, listening to Nathan's slightly labored breath, and stared up at the ceiling. Elton still hadn't said anything—he'd helped them clean Nathan up and sat still while Cora had smeared her poultice on his cuts and bruises, but he hadn't offered any information about what had actually happened inside the councilman's house. They couldn't carry on this way—it was too crazy. Murder couldn't just be the answer to all of their problems. Even if they did manage to kill everyone on the council, which seemed to be their plan, what then? That wouldn't stop the Magistrate from running. It wouldn't stop this terrible order they'd signed, which was now only five days from going into effect. It would just make the Magistrate stop doing the few good things it *did* do while everyone scrambled to fill the vacuum they'd created. She had to talk sense into them. She had to, somehow.

She must have dozed off eventually, because she opened her eyes to sunlight and Nathan sitting up in bed beside her with a paper cup in his hand. Elton was shaving in the bathroom mirror, seeming little worse for wear, and Thomas was hunched on the mattress by the window to stare down at his phone. The air in the room seemed heavy, but Nathan smiled down at her as she stirred.

"There she is," he said gently. "Good morning, my love."

"Morning," she murmured, keeping the blanket bunched up around her front as she sat up. She shook her head when he offered her a sip of his coffee. "Glad you didn't bleed to death in the night."

"As am I," he chuckled. "Due entirely to your diligent care, as always."

"So are you going to tell us what the hell the deal was yesterday?"

"How do you mean?"

"What do you mean, how do I mean?" She shoved him by the arm, and he tutted at her as he had to shift to avoid spilling his coffee. "You killed all those people, right?"

"Not all of them," Nathan answered defensively.

"What?"

"We left one Chaser outside," Elton spoke up, wiping soap from his jaw with a towel as he leaned against the wall by the bathroom. "To tell who'd done it."

Cora let out a disbelieving scoff. “How...how is it a *good* thing for everyone to know that you two killed a member of the council?”

“We can’t possibly tell every witch in the country that this order is happening, and even if we could, they probably wouldn’t believe it. What we *can* do is let the Magistrate know that Nathaniel Moore knows.”

“Elton is learning the power of a strategic name drop,” Nathan chuckled into his cup.

“There’s no point to putting up with your shit if we can’t even put your reputation to use sometimes.”

“But you’ve just made it harder for us, haven’t you?” Cora pressed the balls of her hands into her temples. “We were already on the run from damn near everyone, but now you’ve killed a councilman! That’s got to be, like, the worst possible on-the-run you can be! That’s like five-stars, tanks and helicopters coming after you, GTA-wanted!”

“It is something of a lifestyle adjustment,” Nathan admitted, but before Cora could argue further, Thomas’s voice interrupted them from across the room.

“You idiots,” he said, and then a little louder as he turned to face them, “you *fucking* idiots.” He grimaced and turned his head for a moment as though biting his tongue, but then snorted in frustration and lifted his gaze back to Nathan.

“I hardly think that’s called for—”

“I just heard from my friend in Ottawa.” He lifted his phone with the screen toward them. “Everyone is losing their minds, so good job on that. But that councilor you just killed? He opposed the order of repression. He argued against it and was outvoted. You killed one of the good guys.”

Cora’s heart sank. “Are you serious?” she whispered.

“They’re holding a session today to vote on who the new chair will be, and tomorrow they’ll take nominations for the new council member. Apparently the Magister of Ontario is being mentioned.”

“How do you know that?” Elton asked, taking a half step forward into the room.

“My friend in Ottawa is the administrative assistant.”

“For Hubbard?” Elton clarified.

“Oh, him,” Nathan chuckled. “He’s the one whose son you murdered, isn’t he?”

The blond didn’t answer him.

“This is crazy,” Cora half whimpered. She put her face in her hands and mashed her cheeks as she dragged her palms down them in frustration. “It’s too much. We can’t do this.”

“What else are we supposed to do?” Nathan asked. “We can’t just let them carry on.”

“We have to *help people!*” she countered. “You’re talking about the government, Nathan! You can’t just...fix the government by murdering people! We can’t be everywhere at once, but we can do what we can, right? They’re still going to be looking for Thomas’s friends, and they’re going to start rounding people up no matter what we do, aren’t they?”

“First, we need a new plan,” Elton said, far too calmly. “And we definitely need to get away from here. We need somewhere safer than a motel. We shouldn’t have stayed the night here as it is.”

“This is exactly why I said you shouldn’t do this,” Thomas answered, rising from the mattress to face the larger man. “I told you it was a stupid idea. Cora told you it was a stupid idea. You must have *known* it was a stupid idea. But let’s just beat the problem to death instead of trying to solve it, like always.”

“When you have a better idea, Thomas, you speak right up,” Elton snapped back.

“Literally having no idea at all is better than what you two have just done!”

“Oh my god, stop arguing!” Cora shouted, and the three men turned their eyes on her. “If I’d *known* you’d left a frickin’ calling card, I would have taken us farther away! In this instance—and pretty much only this one—Elton’s right. We need to find somewhere safe to hide until we can figure this out. If anybody has a suggestion, then let’s hear it, but getting angry at each other isn’t going to help anything.”

A few moments of guilty silence passed before Elton broke it.

“Hotel rooms aren’t going to cut it,” he said, notably more softly. “Especially not the kind of hotels you’re going to want to stay at,” he added with a pointed look at Nathan. “We can’t do that anymore. Even if Korshunov wasn’t still alive.”

“May as well turn ourselves in,” Nathan sighed. “One of you had better be prepared to fluff my towels and make my coffee for me.”

“How can you still be worried about creature comforts right now?” Cora asked, but Nathan only shrugged one shoulder and took a sip of his coffee.

She wondered briefly if someone *had* made it for him and cast a narrow-eyed look at Elton.

“We need somewhere that can be warded properly,” Elton went on. “Somewhere that can be hidden. Maybe a cabin somewhere, or—”

“Yes,” Nathan chuckled, “a creepy cabin in the woods is just the place for a base of operations. Perhaps we could just pitch a tent on the front lawn of every Magister we plan to kill.”

“You’d rather we keep staying in high-profile hotels that are going to guarantee we get raided constantly, just so you can get your morning swim in?”

“You’d be disappointed if I began to lose my handsome figure, darling.”

“I have a house,” Thomas interrupted in a loud voice that cut through the argument, though his eyes were shut and his mouth was pressed into a thin line that suggested he regretted saying it. He gave a short, resigned sigh and opened his eyes, glancing to each of his companions in turn. “I have a house.”

2

Elton kept to back roads while he drove a new car they'd stolen from the motel parking lot, which was going to extend their already almost six-hour drive. Nathan had his arm dangling from the open passenger window, too tired even to fuss with the radio, and Thomas sat solemnly in the back seat beside Cora, staring out the window at the passing trees with his arms folded loosely across his stomach. Cora let what she felt was a very long time pass in silence before the question finally burst from her lips.

"Seriously, nobody's going to say anything?"

Thomas's reflection in the window twisted into a scowl, but he didn't look at her.

"Nobody's going to talk about Thomas having an ancestral witch-home in *Salem*."

"It's just as likely a place to have an ancestral witch-home as anywhere else," Nathan spoke up from the front. "None of that old nonsense had anything to do with real witchcraft."

"I mean, I'm not a historian, but the actual witch in the car whose house we're going to might suggest otherwise, right?"

"It is sort of an incriminating last name," Elton added, briefly locking eyes with his glaring friend in the rearview mirror.

“Is it?” Cora asked, and she leaned forward in her seat to try to catch Thomas’s gaze. “Is your family famous?”

“The *name* may be famous, among people who care,” he admitted. “Whether that’s my family line or not, I don’t know. I never asked, and I don’t care. I didn’t want to have anything to do with it anymore.” When Thomas glanced sidelong at her as though expecting her probing to continue, she only smiled.

“Thank you for doing this for us.”

Thomas paused, then let out a small snort and leaned back against the car door to stare out the window.

With only a couple of bathroom and snack breaks along the way, they made their way through the winding New England roads, skirting New York, Boston, and any other cities they got too close to for Elton’s comfort. Salem itself lay beyond seaside cliffs and tree-lined hills, just beside the endless water that looked cold even in spring. Thomas’s house sat at the top of a lonesome hill, surrounded by a wide yard edged by dense forest. It was a grim-looking place, broad and imposing, made of two stories of black wood and narrow windows. The only color Cora could see was the front door, which had been painted a bold red. It made for a pretty bleak picture, all alone in the woods.

Nathan gave a little chuckle as Elton pulled their stolen car up the worn path to the door and turned off the engine.

“This is quaint,” he said, already climbing out of the car to get a better look.

Cora leaned over to look out the door once Thomas had opened it to let himself out. “Yeah,” she agreed uncertainly. “Doesn’t look at all like a creepy witch house.”

“I quite like it, actually,” Nathan said. He tilted his head and let his hip rest against the car. “Reminds me a bit of the house I grew up in.”

“Did the house you grew up in have ghosts in it? Because this looks like it has ghosts in it.”

Thomas started across the yard without waiting for them, and he crouched down near the front door to place his hand on one corner of the short stone fence that ringed the house. He reached into his pocket to tug free a small scrap of chalk and carefully scratched a marking Cora didn’t recognize onto the surface of the stone. As soon as he removed his hand,

the mark seemed to burn away, and the fence gave a little crack, revealing a hole just big enough for Thomas to reach in for the hidden key.

“Neat,” Cora chuckled, but he wasn’t listening. He turned the key in the lock and leaned his shoulder against the door to push it free from where it stuck to the frame, the hinges creaking from lack of use.

Cora tried to follow him inside, but she stopped short in the doorway, Nathan bumping into her back at the sudden halt and putting quick hands on her shoulders to steady her. She’d hit something—she scrunched her nose to ease the sting and reached out a hand, flattening it against the invisible something keeping her out. It didn’t feel like a normal barrier, and she couldn’t see any of the telltale sheen in the air.

Thomas glanced over his shoulder at her sound of pained surprise and paused. “Sorry,” he said. “One second.” He moved over to the large fireplace at the center of the room and scuffed his foot in the dusty ash, then bent to scoop up a small silver coin. Once he had blown away the soot, the whatever-it-was under Cora’s hand gave way, and she was able to enter with Nathan and Elton behind her.

“A coin did that?” she asked, and Thomas wiped away some of the remaining ash with his thumb and tucked the silver into his pocket.

“Keeps witches out,” he said simply, before moving deeper into the dark house.

The house had obviously been empty for some time—dust covered every flat surface, all the doors were hard to open, and the floors creaked sadly underfoot. The kitchen was bare except for a few ancient-looking dry goods in the cupboards and the piles of soot at the base of the massive fireplace that made up one wall, lined with dusty, dried herbs that had been hung from the ceiling above the fire who knew how long ago. The bedrooms were made neatly, but even touching the folded linens brought up small clouds of neglect. The whole place looked as though it had simply been abandoned one day. The one upside was that the home was massive. They would all be able to have their own rooms, at least.

“Well, it’s a fixer-upper,” Nathan said, patting puffs of dust from the couch cushion before he sat down.

“It’s a good place to hide,” Elton pointed out, though he chose to remain standing rather than take a seat beside Nathan on the decrepit sofa. “But we should move the car somewhere else. It stands out.”

Thomas stood near the doorway to the kitchen, keeping himself at a distance from the others as he always did. “Nominations are being made today for the council to vote on,” he said. “With the current majority, I wouldn’t be surprised if the nominees are nobody good.”

“If Hubbard is being included, that should give you a good idea of their caliber,” Elton muttered.

“Who decides who gets nominated?” Cora asked, drawing her own puff of dust from the cushions as she dropped down beside Nathan. “If the guy you killed is American, shouldn’t they have to appoint another American person?”

“Not necessarily,” the blond answered. “All of the regions are usually represented, but the way things are now, who knows what they may be able to get away with?”

“There’s nothing we can do about it anyway, right?” She huffed out a sigh. “It’s already late, and what the heck could we even do to change anything from here?”

“Nothing,” Thomas spat bitterly, his eyes on the worn floorboards. “At this point, the most we can do is not actively make things worse.”

Cora paused, and she looked at Nathan with a frown on her lips. “We’ve been thinking about it the wrong way.” She turned a little in her seat to face him better. “When I asked you about talking to Magister Calero, you agreed with me that they aren’t all bad, right? So maybe we can find someone better than a Magister who isn’t all bad.”

“Do you have someone in mind, my love?”

She spoke up to address Thomas across the room. “The councilman in Philadelphia—you said he was outvoted. Was he the only one against?”

Thomas shook his head. “One of two. The only other was Marquez, out of Mexico City.”

“Then that’s who we need to talk to.”

“Hold on,” Elton cut in, a soft snort escaping him as he folded his arms. “You’re suggesting we present ourselves to a member of the council and—what? Aside from hope they don’t just throw us in prison immediately?”

“I don’t know what needs to be done to stop this before it gets out of control,” Cora shot back. “And clearly nobody else in this room does, either, or a good man wouldn’t be dead. So why don’t we try to help instead of just break things? Someone who’s on the council must have a better idea of what we can actually do. So ask them.”

“It’s ballsy,” Nathan admitted with a chuckle. “And it’s been a long time since I was in Mexico.” He tilted his head as he looked up at Elton’s skeptical face. “What do you say, darling? Hablas mucho español?”

“I say it’s an idea that’s as likely to get us killed as help anything.”

“I wouldn’t let them touch one precious golden hair, darling,” he said, earning himself a scowl in return. “It is *a* direction, at least. That’s more than we had this morning. And we can work on that little list of yours on the way, I’m sure.”

Elton considered in silence, fingertips drumming slowly on his biceps as he held Nathan’s gaze as though hoping he could see the intentions he was sure the other man wasn’t voicing. “It isn’t exactly lying low,” he finally said.

“There will be one less of you,” Thomas added. “I’m staying here. I’m not running across the country on whatever rampage you two are planning—I’m more use in one place. I’ll do what I can through my contacts, and if you find anyone who needs an escape route, you can send them to me.”

“What about the last couple?” Cora asked. “You said there were more the Magistrate knew about. Nathan said he would help.”

“I did say that,” Nathan agreed. “We can still check in on any others.”

“The last pair are in California. If you can get to them, you can send them back here, too. I’ll take care of it.”

“Well then,” Nathan said, lifting his hand toward Elton in a plaintive gesture. “That sounds as much like a plan as anything else.”

The blond sighed through his nose. “Fine. I’ll see if I can book a flight to Mexico City.”

“Excellent. Try to get one for today, will you? No offense, Mr. Proctor, but I’d rather not subject myself to what might pass for sleeping accommodations in this place. It could do with a good once-over—perhaps with a blowtorch.”

“No offense taken,” Thomas answered dryly. He turned to leave them to their business and disappeared up the creaking stairs with Cora’s eyes on his back.

She frowned softly and picked at the hem of her shirt for a moment, then looked up at Nathan with a furrowed brow. “I think...I’m going to stay,” she said.

“Stay?” Nathan echoed in disbelief. He tilted his head toward Thomas’s exit. “With that? Whatever for?”

“I just—don’t know how much more death I have in me. And there’s been a lot of it lately. I want to help, but I can’t just keep patching you guys up every night and wondering how much of the blood on you is yours. And I definitely can’t help you kill anyone. I won’t.” She smiled faintly as she glanced between Nathan and Elton. “You guys are good at what you do—and I get that sometimes violence is necessary. But after seeing all the people inside that factory in Miami, I just...there are just other ways to help that I’d be better at, I think. And Thomas shouldn’t have to do all this alone, especially if you guys might be sending people back here.”

Nathan reached out to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “Far be it from me to stand in the way of what you want, my love. You know I’d love to have you with me, but the choice is always yours.”

“Just try not to get killed without me there, okay?” She looked back up at Elton. “That goes double for you, since Nathan has a rewind button and you don’t.”

“If I do die, I’ll make sure it’s while you’re with me,” Elton answered, and Cora scoffed at him.

“Look at you, making jokes. Nathan’s rubbing off on you. Maybe it’s not such a good idea for you two to go off together by yourselves.”

Elton seemed to tense slightly where he stood, and Cora saw his eyes cut over to where Nathan lounged on the sofa, smirking up at him. Maybe he hadn’t realized until that moment that Cora staying behind would mean traveling with Nathan—alone. It would surely be an illuminating experience for him.

Elton was able to find a direct flight to Mexico City that left in the middle of the night from Boston, which gave them just enough time to eat some of the food Cora brought from town, have a nap, and load their things back into the car. Thomas had not been keen at all on the idea of Cora staying behind, but she hadn’t given him much choice—when she’d gone on a grocery run, she’d even picked up two new sets of sheets and a few bath linens to make the old house just a little bit more livable.

Nathan was already leaning against the car with a cigarette in his mouth and the radio playing by the time Elton opened the front door to start their drive to the airport. Thomas stopped him with a light tap to his elbow before he could step outside.

“Before you go.” Thomas glanced sidelong toward the car, hesitating, then looked back to the taller man’s face. “You asked me to look into 18th century riots in Philadelphia.”

Elton perked up. “Did you find anything?”

“There is record of a Magistrate protest in 1789. It was covered up in the reg records as some sort of labor dispute, but the archives say different. There was an attack on the administration building—some twenty-five or thirty people. They started killing Magistrate officials and guards right in the street, but they were overwhelmed.”

“So what happened to them?”

“Nothing happened. It was a massacre.”

“What about the survivors?”

“There were no survivors, Elton. Whatever Moore told you—either he wasn’t really there, or he wasn’t on the side he said he was on.”

Elton glanced over his shoulder to where Nathan stood with his hip against the hood of their stolen car, lifting his hands in an impatient question. “I’m not sure those are the only options,” he murmured, hesitating a moment more before giving his old friend a nod. “Thanks, Thomas. I appreciate it.”

The other man dropped his voice. “You’re really not taking this girl with you? I’m not roommate material. Nock got me halfway out the window once before I could calm her down.”

“Cora just wants to help,” Elton assured him. “She’s a good person—and she’s here to lighten your load. So let her. We’ll be in touch when we land,” he added, and he paused at the front step but decided against trying to shake Thomas’s hand.

Cora appeared once Elton was outside, and she squeezed him and Nathan in turn and kissed their cheeks before they climbed into the car. Elton watched her in the rearview mirror until they turned the corner out of the lonesome driveway, but as soon as they were out of sight, he grew tense under the awareness that for the first time, he was going to be truly alone with Nathaniel Moore.

3

The streets of Miami had smelled sour as he ran. Droplets of blood hit the ground where he stepped, smeared under his feet in his rush to escape the factory. His psoglav dead—killed by something in Moore that was just as inhuman. His own body was battered and weak, and there was no doubt in his mind that Moore would kill him if he gave him the chance. He had lost the upper hand.

Locked away in a hotel room behind drawn, heavy curtains and breathing air thick with incense lit by a gore-streaked lighter, Nikita Korshunov sat slumped on the floor and bled. The cold fingers of one hand worked the buttons on his shirt, fumbling them undone and easing the sticky fabric from his shoulders. Each shallow breath he took caused a drop of saliva to fall from his parted lips as he pushed aside the wet and matted shirt and leaned against the side of the bed. He shut his eyes and breathed in the smoke, letting his head fall back against the mattress with his knuckles curled loosely against the carpet at his sides. He'd lost a lot of blood.

The incense did its work more slowly than a vodyanoy might have, but he didn't dare risk expending the effort of trying to summon one. He needed time to recover, and he needed time to think.

The incense smoke worked its way through his lungs to his blood and settled there like dust, slowing his heart and stifling the flow in his veins. He laid still for hours, not quite conscious, until the spell had done its work and his heart gave a sudden, life-giving thump that jerked him back to the present.

Nikita coughed and sat forward, taking gasps through a dry throat as he flexed his stiff fingers and wrists. He checked the skin at his sides and chest to make sure the wounds had closed and found only flakes of long-dried blood, so he rose uneasily to his feet and moved to stand in front of the mirror and wash his face.

He was already behind. He couldn't lose track of them now—but Moore had sensed him the last time he'd tried to locate him by his usual methods. He would need to work harder. Being a Chaser wasn't just about magic; sometimes regular detective work was just as effective.

Hao didn't return to the hotel room, but Nikita wasn't worried about him. Either Willis had finally killed him, or he'd given up and gone home. Neither option concerned him. The other man had only been slowing him down, anyway.

He picked up his phone when it rang but dropped it again without answering at the sight of Magister Hubbard's name on the screen. An update would be pointless now—he had nothing to tell except that he had failed. He dressed and zipped up his hastily-packed suitcase, then let the room door slam shut behind him on his way to the car. He couldn't afford to be so unprepared again. Moore was capable of more than even the Magistrate knew. Nikita needed to change his approach.

When he arrived at Maduro's factory, the entire block was taped off with yellow tape, and local police cars sat with lights flashing along the approaching road, but Nikita drove by them without slowing down. He spotted the black SUV parked nearby and pulled his rental onto the curb, scanning the windows for the small blue and gold seal he found stuck to one of the back windows. A woman in a pantsuit stood near the passenger door, eyeing him as he walked toward her as if about to tell him off. Nikita offered his hand to her as he circled the front of the car, and her gaze flicked down to the silver on his hand before she accepted his handshake.

"Nikita Korshunov, out of Ottawa. I'm here on Magister Hubbard's order. I need to have a look inside—have the mundanes compromised

anything?”

“Not yet,” the woman answered. “We’ve kept them out so far, but they’ve been talking to their own higher-ups. We’ll have to wipe the scene soon. You can go on in—I’ll let them know you’re coming.”

“Thank you.” Nikita ducked under the tape barrier and took swift steps toward the factory doors. The scent of blood hit him as soon as he was inside, but he kept walking. The body of his psoglav had collapsed into fur and bone overnight, leaving a greasy smear on the concrete floor along with the mixture of bloodstains—his, the beast’s, and Moore’s. He stepped carefully over the burned marks in the cracked floor and narrowed his eyes, tracing the lines of the circle. It wasn’t a sigil that he recognized. Brushing by another Chaser standing nearby taking notes, Nikita took the metal steps up to the office two at a time so that he could get a better look at the floor. He snapped a photo of the odd circle with his phone and replaced it in his pocket with a frown. Whatever had caused that marking had given Moore power like Nikita had never seen. It had possessed him. Made him into something else.

He glanced over his shoulder into the glass-walled office, where a body lay on the ground covered in a bloodstained sheet. The windows were still smeared with letters made of dry and flaking blood, and the room itself was splattered on almost every surface. The sight brought a twitching sneer to his lip that he restrained as the Chaser taking pictures of the glass looked his way. He’d given Maduro every protection, and the man had still let himself be killed. Useless.

Hao’s body was notably missing. Nikita didn’t bother asking anyone about him.

Back in his car, he sat with the windows up and dialed his home office in Ottawa. It was a main branch of the Magistrate, with a number of experts on staff—someone would know what the symbol meant. He forwarded the photo to the email he was given and went in search of some food while he waited for an answer.

This group—Moore, Willis, Daniels, Proctor—were not so subtle as they liked to think. They had destroyed a councilman’s home in Philadelphia and left a trail of fraud and theft wherever they went. If he had known what sort of crimes to look for, even a mundane police officer would have been able to track them. It was fear—cowardice—that kept the local Chasers from

putting the pieces together. Nikita heard it at almost every station he visited. *Sure, I saw Nathaniel Moore once. Stayed the hell away from him. I've got a wife/husband/children.* The same excuses. He would do better.

On the road somewhere near New York, his phone had rung on the passenger seat, and he scooped it up to answer.

“Korshunov.”

“Hello there!” an older man’s voice answered. “You’re the one who called about this symbol in the picture, aren’t you?”

“Yes. What is it?”

“It’s a veve—the symbol of a loa, or spirit. They’re used in vodou religious practices. Where did you find this one?”

“It was burned into the floor of a factory where I was fighting Nathaniel Moore. He used some spell that did that, and his eyes went red, and they started seeping something black. He became immensely strong afterward—he didn’t seem to feel pain. And I couldn’t speak once he’d done it until I left the area.”

“My God,” the man breathed. “Nathaniel Moore did magic using *this* symbol? You’re positive.”

“You saw the picture.”

A few seconds of silence passed, and then the man began to laugh. “I *knew* it. I told them I knew how he did it, how he didn’t need groundings, how he did things no one else does, and none of them believed me! I’ll show Ferguson who’s got a pointless specialty! That son of a bitch owes me fifty dollars.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This veve,” the man went on, clearly excited now, “is the symbol of a loa called Kalfu. He’s a spirit of the crossroads, diametrically opposed to a spirit called Papa Legba—his mirror. Papa Legba is responsible for letting all good magic into our world, they say. He opens the door, allows practitioners to speak with the spirits of the dead and work their magic. Conversely, Kalfu allows everything bad to pass through. Bad luck, destruction, all magic with an evil purpose—these are his domain. To keep the world in balance. Papa Legba controls positive, well-meaning spirits of the day, and Kalfu is the master of the dark spirits of the night. Our world has both, you see?”

“So Moore is controlling this spirit for his own use?”

“Oh, I doubt that. I don’t know of many real witches who work with him, since the population is low to begin with—you really only see this sort of thing practiced in the Caribbean, and some in Louisiana. But Kalfu isn’t a spirit that anyone *controls*. No, I think—I think that if Moore’s abilities come from Kalfu, it’s more of a blessing, for some reason. Something that allows him to tap into the source, in a way. Free access to the crossroads of magic. I *told* Ferguson that it wasn’t any European magic that could—”

“So what do I do about it?” Nikita interrupted, unwilling to listen to the details of this man’s personal wagers.

“Do?” He paused. “Son, what you described to me just now—that sounds like a possession. They call it being mounted or ridden by the loa. Possession is a matter of course in the vodou religion; it’s a standard part of any service for the Houngan or the Mambo to be temporarily possessed by one of the loa. And what you mentioned about not being able to talk—that’s also common when a practitioner is mounted by Kalfu. But this sounds different. This seems like it had purpose. He acted on his own?”

“He did seem to do it to himself, yes.”

“And he was performing other magic during this time?”

“Yes.”

“That’s fascinating. Something else is definitely going on. Kalfu may be protecting him, for some reason.”

“Any idea why that would be?”

“None at all, I’m afraid. You’d have to ask Kalfu—not that I’d recommend that, either, even if you knew how.”

Nikita frowned, squeezing the steering wheel tight. “I want you to send me all the information you have on this spirit. Anything you think might help. I’ll call you if I have any questions.”

“Oh, feel free, son, feel free! I don’t get many inquiries about vodou up here in Ottawa. I was beginning to think they’d fire me soon if I don’t start earning my keep.”

“Thank you,” Nikita said briskly, then he ended the call and dropped the phone back to the seat beside him, staring out at the highway ahead of him. He needed to know more before he could decide how to proceed. But this was a start.

The Massachusetts breeze still carried a chill even at the end of April, rattling the leaves above and stinging Nikita's nostrils where he waited

beyond the treeline. The stark black house stood out in the neighborhood even at the end of its long, tree-lined driveway, and the stolen car with the Pennsylvania plate was just as out of place.

He watched in silence as Willis loaded a pair of suitcases and a wooden chest into the trunk of the car, and he waited while Moore leaned against the door and smoked a cigarette. They were separating. Why? Nikita's eyes skipped between the men climbing into the car and the young woman waving at them from the doorway. Moore was leaving her behind. In another few seconds, he and Willis would be gone. Nikita would have to chase them again. But Moore was waiting for him. Moore knew he hadn't died in that factory in Miami. And Moore would be the one laying traps, wards, and barriers in front of every step his pursuer tried to take.

Nikita's head tilted slightly as he focused his gaze on the closing red door, allowing the sound of Moore's tires to fade from his hearing. The girl, on the other hand—his companion, his apprentice, his friend—she would be able to tell Nikita his secrets.

The house was suitably far away from the town itself that the night was black enough to hide his approach. He had waited until the last light in the window went dark, and then left his belongings behind in the woods and moved toward the house with a slow, even step. He placed a hand on first the front door, then the one at the end, and finally on the door at the back of the house and found the warm pulse of barrier magic at each. His softly incanted counterspells did nothing to weaken the wards, so he began to try the windows. They didn't seem to be protected, but they wouldn't budge from the force of either his hands or his magic. He couldn't see anything inside except for a few small silver coins resting on the windowsills. He even scaled the back of the house with a bit of help from a vikhor—a spindly, vaguely feminine spirit who hoisted him effortlessly within reach of the ledge with sharp, guiding hands. But when he attempted to reach his arm into the chimney, he was blocked by a barrier he couldn't see, and no charm he knew would allow his hand to pass.

Nikita tried for two hours to break the wards protecting the house. For all his efforts, all he ended up with was a sweaty brow and scratched fingers from where he had attempted to pry some of the windows loose. He stood back from the front door and scowled at it, resisting the urge to simply throw a large rock through the nearest window pane. There would be no

quietly getting into this house. He glanced up toward the second story window where the light inside had been the slowest to go out. She was in there—he knew it. The girl who had burned his face and fractured his ribs. The girl who was closest to Nathaniel Moore, and who he would return to protect, given the right incentive. She would come out sooner or later.

He returned to the woods and scanned the trees, stepping over his abandoned backpack to get at an ash tree with peeling bark. With the small knife from his pocket, he cut a few strips free and twisted them together on his way back to his bag, then dug out a handful of short lengths of wire and used them to shape and secure the bark into a sharp woven pattern. He laid the rough talisman in the grass and sat down, ripping a long shred of fabric from his shirt with the help of his teeth. With the cloth plaited carefully through the wood, he laid the completed charm against the tree closest to the house, pressed his palm against it, and spoke the words, “Смотрите их.” The amulet snapped forward against the wood, sealing itself to the surface of the bark with a quick, burning hiss, and Nikita lowered his hand to inspect it. It would do. It was a simple fetish, but it would suffice to alert him of any spikes in magical energy in the area.

With one last glance back at the stark black house, Nikita gathered up his backpack and made his way through the woods back toward the main road. Now he could wait.

4

Nathan had been too well-behaved. He had quietly drummed on the side of the car along to the radio with his arm hung from the open window the entire way to the airport, given them both unobtrusive glances that got them through security without incident, and now sat beside Elton on the plane with a stolen crossword puzzle book open in his lap. He took up the armrest between them and leaned his chin in his hand, two fingers idly brushing his mouth the way they sometimes did, as though missing the cigarette he couldn't have. He hadn't even tried to have a drink at the bar while they waited to board their flight.

Good behavior made Elton nervous.

"You're staring, darling," Nathan murmured without looking up from his puzzle.

"You're quiet."

"You're suspicious." Black eyes flicked up to him as Nathan tilted his chin in his hand to better face the blond. The amused little smile on his lips didn't comfort Elton at all.

"Shouldn't I be? You're always more trouble than this."

"I didn't want you to regret going off with me straight away," he chuckled. He sat up a bit straighter and let the book fall closed. "It's quite a

leap for you to go from dogged pursuer to eager accomplice in such a brief span. You can't even claim you're here to protect Cora anymore."

"Was I ever claiming that?"

"You're a *known associate*," Nathan said, his smile turning sly. "They'll put your name in the archives right next to mine before we're through; you know that, don't you?"

Elton frowned and let a few moments pass without answering. He did know. He knew the decision he'd made months ago when he'd freely let Nathan escape custody back in Arizona, though he hadn't realized it at the time. He hadn't really been a Chaser anymore, even then.

"What I still don't really understand," Nathan went on, "is *why*." He waved away Elton's protest before he could make it. "I know about the sense of duty, the criminal past, and what-have-you. I know that something about my story caught your attention, and that you wanted to be the proud Chaser bringing in the collar of a lifetime—but that isn't quite enough, I don't think. What makes a man give up his best years to chasing down a ghost?"

Elton held the other man's dark gaze. "You want to know more about me?"

"I think you're an interesting sort of person, Mr. Willis—and I'm curious by nature. I can only glean so much from our precious time together."

"Quid pro quo," Elton answered.

Nathan's eyebrows lifted, and he gave a soft laugh and leaned against the window. "Cheeky," he murmured with a smirk pulling his lips. "As you wish. If I like your answer, I'll give you one of my own. Provided it's a question I'm willing to answer. You can't just string your birthday out for days."

"You were a way to prove myself," Elton said. "I started upper school late. My mother couldn't afford to send me to a Magistrate school. I went to regular mundane public schools until I was seventeen—if I went at all. That was when my best friend got sent away for murder, and his brother was able to get me sponsored for the Academy. That's how I met Thomas. Every other person he'd roomed with had complained so much that he got stuck with me—two years behind and a juvenile record." He looked down at his hands and subtly traced the line where his wedding ring had once rested. "I took a lot of shit. If it wasn't for Thomas and Jo, I wouldn't have graduated at all. When I heard about you, and how no one had even come close to you

all those years, I thought...maybe I could undo all the bad things I'd done if I could just do one great, good thing. And show everyone who'd ever put me down that I was worth more than they thought I was."

When he looked up, Nathan's smile had faded slightly. He didn't answer right away, but watched the blond with pensive eyes. Then he said softly, "Ask your question, Elton."

"You died in Philadelphia in 1789, didn't you?"

"Like a dog with an old bone," Nathan chuckled. "Fine. Yes."

Elton waited, but no elaboration followed. "That's it? Yes? Why were you involved in the riot? How did you survive?"

"That sounds like two more questions, darling."

The blond scowled at him. "That's not a very good answer."

"Ask better questions," Nathan said with a blithe wave of his hand. "Who was the first person you killed?"

Elton spared a glance at the occupied seats behind them, and Nathan put up a narrow barrier of magic to mute their conversation, seeming to guess the other man's worries.

"Marco Cheung," Elton answered.

Now it was Nathan's turn to wait. After a beat of silence without further explanation, he laughed. "Fair enough."

"Why did you help a mob attack the Magistrate in 1789?"

"Because they killed my wife."

Elton pulled back slightly in surprise. Nathan's tone hadn't changed, but his black eyes were sharper than before as they scanned the blond's hesitant face.

"Your wife?" Elton echoed, and Nathan shrugged, picking at one of the stones on his bracelet as a pretense for breaking the other man's gaze.

"My fiancée, more precisely. A Spanish girl I brought back from Cuba with me—a reg, which they didn't take kindly to. You know how it goes from there." He lifted one finger in a gesture of denial as he heard Elton's soft intake of breath. "And that's all you'll get on that topic. If you want this little game to continue, then change course. And tell me if any part of your gang initiation was sexual."

Elton snorted. "We're done," he said, and Nathan laughed and settled back into his seat.

"I'll take that as a yes, you know."

Elton pointedly ignored him as the barrier around them broke and Nathan returned to his puzzle, but he couldn't keep the frown from his face. The more he learned about Nathaniel Moore, the less he felt he understood. This was a man who killed nigh indiscriminately and seemed to feel no remorse for any of his crimes—and yet he protected those close to him with unrivaled ferocity. The image of Nathan, young for the first time, with a bright, hopeful smile on his face and a beautiful bride-to-be on his arm, made Elton's stomach ache. This man had—Elton had to assume—sold himself to a dangerous spirit in exchange for merely the opportunity to seek revenge on the government that took his future from him. As ruthless as Nathan seemed, and as cruel as he could be, there seemed to be only one thing that really mattered to him. Family. And it seemed to be the thing that had been most frequently denied to him.

Elton glanced at his companion out of the corner of his eye, guilt thickening in his chest. Nathan hummed tunelessly under his breath as he filled in an answer on his crossword, apparently unbothered by the end of the conversation, but Elton shifting in his seat drew his attention.

“I'll give you one for free,” Elton said, and Nathan ticked a curious eyebrow at him. “Something that I should have told you a long while ago.”

“I love you, too, darling,” Nathan chuckled.

Elton shook his head. “Your other two children,” he said slowly, waiting a moment for Nathan to give him his full attention. “One of them married. And had a child. He's living in San Jose, last I heard.”

Nathan's brow furrowed, and he looked back down at the pen between his fingers. “Living,” he repeated.

“I could help you find him. If you wanted.”

Nathan hesitated. “He's a reg?”

Elton nodded.

“Then I suppose he'll need all the help he can get,” Nathan snorted. He glanced back at Elton and offered him a small nod. “I'll take you up on it. Perhaps when this Magistrate business is sorted and I won't be more of a danger to him than a blessing.”

“When has anyone ever called you a blessing?”

“Only while they try to catch their breath,” Nathan teased, and Elton sighed and plucked a magazine from the seat pocket to put an end to the conversation. “Where did you say we're going after this? Nevada?”

“Not that I'm looking forward to keeping hold of your leash in Las Vegas, but yes.”

“Oh, I'll go easy on you, darling, just this once.” Nathan paused once more with his dark eyes locked on the other man's green. “Thank you, Elton.”

“...You're welcome.”

When they landed in Mexico City, it didn't take Nathan long to sniff out a fellow witch willing to speak to him. Elton was forced to follow and trust while Nathan chatted with locals in rapid Spanish and stopped a street vendor right before closing to obtain a quick meal of some sort of blue-black, eye-shaped tortillas smothered with pork belly and cheese that he told Elton were called “tlacoyos.” It tasted much better than it looked.

They walked the city together as the sun set, leaving their way illuminated only by the bright orbs of streetlights. It wasn't as hot as Elton expected from Mexico; the air was cool, and a breeze ran through the streets that would have been pleasant if not for the smell of sewers it brought with it. Nathan led him from person to person, apparently following the directions of one to the next until they found themselves on a quiet, cobblestone street lined with low-roofed houses, each painted a different bright color. Nathan put out his cigarette with his shoe when they reached an ivy-covered house with vibrant blue paint around the windows and a broad rooftop balcony.

“This is the place, supposedly,” he said with a tilt of his head toward the matching blue door. “Casa de Marquez.”

Elton led the way to the front step and laid a hand on the door to try to feel the subtle vibration of a barrier, but there was nothing. “It's not warded,” he said over his shoulder, but Nathan only shrugged.

“Maybe Marquez is a trusting sort. Just give it a knock. See what happens.”

“You're serious?”

“It's only polite to knock, Elton. We do come in peace, after all.”

Elton frowned skeptically at him but gave the door three firm knocks. A shadow passed one of the lit windows near the door, and a soft voice called out, “Un momento, un momento!”

The slightly chubby woman who answered the door must have barely been brushing five-foot-five. She wore a long, sleeveless maroon dress with

lace along the neckline, and her dark, heavily grey-streaked hair was tied up in a tidy bun. She had to crane her neck a bit to look up into Elton's face, but she was smiling.

“Buenas noches. ¿Como puedo—” She stopped short as she glanced past Elton at his companion, and all the color drained from her face as her brown eyes grew large. She snatched up a walking stick from beside the door and snapped, “Tlepitzalo!” with more viciousness than Elton would have thought possible from the aging woman.

Nathan stumbled backward as a bright orange flame burst to life at the front of his shirt, immediately engulfing his upper half. He flailed for a moment and swore while the door to the house slammed shut once again, but then he managed to get out, “Mourir soti!” Black smoke made a miniature whirlwind around him, snuffing the flame, and he coughed out a bit more and put his hands on his knees to laugh.

“You think that was Señora Marquez?”

“Safe bet.”

“Think she singed my eyebrows,” he muttered, running a hand over his sooty face before reaching up to thump his fist against the door. “Señora,” he called, “Escúcheme! Estoy aquí para ayudarte!”

The woman's wrinkled, suspicious face appeared between the lace curtains in the front window, and she scowled up at the pair through the glass. “No ayudas a nadie,” she shouted back, muffled by the window.

“Señora,” Nathan tried again, “quiero hablar. Eso es todo. Lo prometo,” he added, making a crossing gesture over his heart with one finger and raising his hands in surrender.

She pursed her lips and glared up at both of them in turn with narrowed eyes, then jerked the curtains shut again. Nathan and Elton exchanged a shrugging glance, but as Nathan lifted his hand to knock again, the knob turned, and the woman stood in the doorway with her walking stick raised threateningly toward them. “Dos minutos,” she said, and she took a single step back to allow them inside.

Nathan put a hand to his heart to offer her a half bow of thanks on his way past and waited just inside for her to shut the door behind Elton. “Habla inglés, Señora Marquez?” He gestured toward Elton as though that was sufficient explanation.

“Of course I speak English,” she answered with a faint, rolling accent. “Now tell me what you want before I cook you both and feed you to my

cats.”

“I take it you know who I am,” Nathan said, and the woman snorted at him.

“Oh, I remember you, all right. I saw enough of your face plastered on every flat surface at the Magistrate back in my day.”

“They never did get my good side,” he lamented.

Elton put a hand on Nathan's shoulder to brush him aside. “Ms. Marquez, we're here about the Order of Repression.”

Marquez narrowed her eyes at the blond and gripped her walking stick a little tighter. “Did you pay Mr. Lunsford this same call?”

“At his house, we didn't knock,” Nathan piped up.

“Mr. Lunsford was a mistake,” Elton cut in. “A misunderstanding. We're here to try to make up for it.”

“To make up for your *murder*?”

“It sounds worse when you say it like that,” Nathan sighed. “Señora—I've been told that you voted against this measure. Is that true?”

“Yes,” she answered with a quick jut of her chin.

“And do you have an idea of what can be done to put a stop to it?”

“I—” She hesitated for the first time under Nathan's steady gaze, and her tightening fingers squeaked against the worn wood of her walking stick. “I will do whatever I can to end this madness,” she finally said. “And even if you kill me, someone will take my place! Someone will stop this!”

“Señora, you misunderstand me.” The woman had a subtle tremble in her skin even as Nathan took an amiable half-step forward and extended his hand to her. “I am at your service.”

Marquez stared up at him with her brown eyes drawn wide, not moving to accept his gesture. “But...you—”

“This is a one-time, exclusive offer, Señora Marquez. I want to stop this Order from destroying people's lives. If that's something that you also want, and you think that I can be of help—then I will be at your disposal.”

The councilwoman dropped her gaze to Nathan's waiting hand and slowly reached out to take it, but she paused a scant inch from touching him as though she thought his grip may burn.

“An advocate such as you,” she murmured, and Nathan gently tutted at her with a dangerous smile on his face.

“A weapon, Señora,” he corrected. “If you have the stomach to use me.”

Marquez furrowed her brow, and a moment later, her hand closed around Nathan's.

"Good choice," he said, his demeanor instantly shifting as he offered her a friendly grin. "Could I get a cup of coffee? We've had rather a long day."

The air in the room didn't feel nearly as tense as Elton thought it probably should. He sat next to Nathaniel Moore at the round wooden table of a Magistrate Councilwoman, who placed a mug of hot black coffee in front of him before taking the place across from them with all the calm politeness of a grandmother with visiting children. Her hospitality had not, however, extended as far as offering Nathan anything to remove the remaining soot from his face with. Maybe it was to remind her who she was talking to.

"What sort of help are you offering, exactly?" she asked once she had settled. She warmed her thin hands on her mug but kept her walking stick leaned against the table beside her, easily within reach.

"Well I suspect you know what I'm good at," Nathan chuckled into his own mug.

"I don't take your crimes lightly, Moore," she snapped. "I lost more than a few friends because of you."

"You worked at the Magistrate?" Elton asked, hoping to change the tone of the conversation.

"I was a Chaser, when I was young," she answered, still terse as her eyes cut to the blond. "Like you."

Elton paused. "You know me?"

"Of course I know you. You helped to kill Lunsford, and a Magister's son. You escaped from jail in Toronto. You murdered a man in Miami—a cruel death—and have been in the violent company of Nathaniel Moore ever since. I've had your file on my desk for three weeks, Elton Willis."

"You see, darling? You're getting a reputation already."

"Maybe we should focus on what we came here for," Elton answered firmly.

Nathan set down his mug and leaned his elbows on the table. "Here's what I propose. You're in a singular position to know who makes this Order go and what can be done to make it stop. So—tell me who stands in the way of the right people being promoted, and I remove them. Who are the

candidates for the new place on the council, and how do we make certain that you're named the new Chair?"

Marquez snorted. "Little chance of that. A woman hasn't been Chair of the Council in three hundred years. It's twice as unlikely without someone like Lunsford to voice his support. Morris is the likely choice."

"Morris Gagnon?" Elton asked, and Marquez nodded.

Nathan looked down at his cup as he ran his fingertip along the rim. "And do we like Mr. Gagnon?"

"He's a politician," Marquez sneered. "He says and does whatever he thinks will make him look the best to the most people. If we turn the tide of the voice, he'll turn with it. As for the candidates—" She paused to take her first sip of coffee. "It doesn't look good."

"Is there someone on the list that you do prefer?"

The woman considered. She looked between the two men with a frown adding more wrinkles to her brow. "If I tell you, does that mean that the others are in danger?"

"If you want them to be," Nathan answered easily. "If you think there's a better approach, I'm listening."

"Is killing just your answer to everything?"

"I'm a very specific sort of weapon, Señora. Do you plan to use me or not?"

Marquez chewed her bottom lip, refusing to turn her gaze from Nathan's black eyes. "I can't be connected to this," she said after a long pause.

Nathan let out a laugh. "Who would believe it?"

She watched him for a minute more, and then she rose from her seat and carried her walking stick with her into the next room. When she returned, she placed a small piece of paper on the table and slid it across the surface to him. It looked like a resume, with a photo of a man in the top left corner and a long and impressive-looking curriculum vitae below.

"This man," she said, "must not be allowed to be made a member of the Council. If he were—no longer an option, let's say, then the next candidate on the table would make the short list. And *that* person, I believe, could be made to see reason."

"Well then." Nathan picked up the paper and skimmed it on the way to passing it to Elton, who tucked it safely into his breast pocket. "Sounds like our path is laid before us, darling." He took another drink of his coffee and pushed back from the table as he set it down. "Give the Councilwoman my

cell phone number, and let's be on our way. I'll be outside—dying for a fucking smoke.”

In the wake of his exit, Elton gave a sigh and picked a pen from his pocket to write down the number as he was told.

“Is he always this way?” Marquez asked. “This is Nathaniel Moore?”

“Believe me; I said the same thing.”

By the time they made it outside, Nathan was already halfway through his cigarette. He was polite enough to hold it out of the way behind him while he wished Marquez well and took her hand.

“I'll expect your call, Señora, when you decide the next step.”

He gave her a quick salute and tugged Elton gently by the sleeve, and the Councilwoman watched from her doorstep as the North American magistrate's two most wanted men walked freely from her home with killing on their mind—and at her command.

5

Cora wasn't sure how long Thomas's house had been abandoned, precisely, but the place was a disaster. She spent the first night coughing up dust every time she shifted on the mattress in the room she'd chosen, even after she'd tried to clean it up. The first order of business the next morning had been to make her way into town and get some real food. They would need groceries if they were going to be staying here a while. There was no car on the property now that Nathan and Elton had left, but she'd been able to find a bicycle leaning up against the wall in the woodshed that took only a bit of air in the tires and some oiling before the wheels began to turn smoothly. After cleaning the grease from her hands, she'd knocked on Thomas's door to ask if he wanted anything in particular and received only silence in response.

It was going to be fun staying here.

She strapped her canvas purse across her chest and pedaled toward town while her phone gave her directions from its pocket, her lungs burning more than a little by the time she reached the grocery store. Being on the lam with Nathan hadn't been good for her jogging routine. She managed to fit most of her purchased cleaning supplies and food into the bike's basket and balanced the rest of the bags on the handlebars, but the trip back uphill

toward Thomas's house involved half a dozen stops to catch her breath. There were definite upsides to Nathan being around to steal cars for them.

She arrived at the house with her shirt stuck firmly to her back by sweat despite the chill in the air outside, and she unloaded her bags in a pile just inside the front door and dropped herself beside them to huff. The house was silent; Cora leaned forward to peer up the stairs and paused to listen, but there was nothing. Pursing her lips in thought as though it would help her hear better, she waited another few seconds before calling, "Thomas?"

Again, she got no answer. Was he dead?

Cora dragged the bags of food into the colonial-looking kitchen and put all of the dry goods away on the open shelves. She searched for a refrigerator and found in the only likely spot a tall drawer that looked like it used to hold some kind of grain, but now was mostly dried, flaky mold. She took a moment to frown at it in disappointment and then stalked over to the foot of the stairs.

"Thomas!" she shouted, and she waited with her hands on her hips.

A sharp snap across the room made her jump, and she spun to face the sound. Thomas emerged from a cellar door she hadn't even known was there, and as soon as he let it drop shut, the seam in the floor vanished again, leaving smooth wood with no trace of a handle or a door at all. Cora moved by him to take a closer look, but even when she crouched to run her fingertips across the floor, she could detect no trace of the entrance.

"I didn't know this place had a basement."

"As far as you're concerned, it doesn't," Thomas answered flatly, already heading for the stairs.

"Hey! I was trying to talk to you!" Cora rose to follow him, and he paused to look over his shoulder at her. "Does this place not have a fridge?"

"No."

"How is that possible? People lived here in this century, right?"

"Pretty sure."

"Well I bought groceries so we don't starve to death. So what do I do with the stuff that needs to keep cold?"

Thomas glanced past her toward the back door and gave a small tilt of his chin. "Put it in the root cellar. Or the spring house."

"The what or the what?"

The man exhaled a sigh through his nose, gestured to the door, and led her through the overgrown backyard until they had almost reached the

surrounding woods. There, stuck into the side of a small hill, was a stack of flat stones arranged to form an opening into the ground. Cora leaned forward on tiptoe to peer into the dark entrance, and if she squinted, she could just see an old wooden door with iron hinges waiting at the bottom of the rough stone steps. She turned back to Thomas with uncertainty written on her cringing face.

“That's where you expect me to put the food?”

“It's a root cellar. It's cold enough.”

“It's a murder hole, Thomas. This is a place you put bodies.”

“Also vegetables,” he shrugged.

“You're serious with this?” She waved back at the cavelike entrance in disbelief, attempting to encompass the entire situation in her “this.”

“If you don't want to use it, don't buy things that need to be refrigerated.” He turned away from her to point down the hill, drawing her gaze to a bit of wooden roof visible jutting out of the ground below. “The spring house is down there. It's cool enough for most things this time of year, and there's fresh water.”

“Fresh—” Cora stared at him. “But the house has running water, right?”

Thomas stared right back at her without expression. “There are toilets inside.”

“Well for all I know I have to come out here to fill the tank back up or whatever!”

“No,” he sighed. “The house is on a private well. It draws power from the city, but that's as on-grid as it gets here. And if you go looking for a real stove, you're going to be disappointed. I'll see about having some wood brought up from town so we can get a fire in the hearth and do some cooking.”

“Jesus Christ,” Cora laughed. “I didn't know I was signing up for the colonial experience.”

“I'm sure Moore would be happy to get you a flight out to wherever he is.” Without waiting for a response, Thomas turned and made his way back to the house, leaving Cora standing next to the closest murder-hole she had to a fridge. Her brow furrowed as she watched him close the door behind him without looking back. Had she made a mistake by staying here? Thomas clearly didn't want her around. How could she help him if he was just going to shut himself in a secret basement and not even talk to her?

With a snorting huff, she stomped back up to the house and snatched up her bags of food and a sad-looking straw broom from the corner of the kitchen, then walked with arms full back down to the cave-fridge. It was actually pretty cool inside, she had to admit. She tucked her shirt up around her nose and grumpily swept as much of the dust and dirt as she could from the shelves and stone floor, only stopping a few times to cough. When the room was as clean as it was going to get, she piled the vegetables at the very back of the gloomy little cavern and stood back to admire her work. It wasn't Thomas's decision whether she helped or not.

Cora spent the next few hours cleaning the house from top to bottom—she scrubbed windows, dusted shelves, and swept floors, eventually bringing the aging two-story house up to at least a reasonable standard of living. She didn't spot Thomas once during the whole endeavor, and when she knocked on his bedroom door even after saving it for last, she received no answer.

“Well just sleep in all that dust then,” she griped at the door, hoping she was loud enough for the recluse inside to hear. She stomped heavily back down the stairs and made her way to the kitchen, where—after much heaving and swearing and complaining—she was able to get a cleaned-out iron cauldron lifted onto the metal hook at the back of the large brick hearth. It wasn't much good without firewood, but she made do with a hunk of labradorite from her kit that she was able to keep alight by magic as long as she didn't get too distracted. She was a decent cook with a real stove, as her mother had passed on the burden of cooking dinner almost as soon as Cora could reach the stove, but she didn't actually know anything about cooking in a cauldron. She'd bought normal groceries at the store—like rice, cereal, canned soups, some ramen—little that lent itself to hearth-cooking. She definitely hadn't trusted the chicken she bought to keep fresh in the murder cellar, so she cut it up the best she could with the somewhat dull knife she found in a sticky drawer and tossed it into the pot. It cooked faster in the iron cauldron than she could prepare the few vegetables she had, and soon thin wisps of smoke had become a cloud filling the space between the wooden ceiling beams.

Thomas appeared with a scowl on his lips while she was attempting to fan the smoke out an open window with a baking sheet.

“What are you doing?”

Cora froze and turned to look over her shoulder with a sheepish grin. Thomas's voice was steady, but she could see the subtle pulse of restrained irritation in his neck as he clenched his jaw.

"Cooking?" she offered, and Thomas's nostrils flared with his next breath. But rather than scold her or question her further, he approached the cauldron and its burning contents and peered inside. Without comment, he drew his not-a-wand from the pocket of his cardigan and murmured a few words Cora couldn't quite hear, drawing a smooth stream of water from the kitchen faucet across to the iron pot. While Cora waved the last smoke remnants through the window, Thomas scooped her chopped vegetables into the cauldron and disappeared out the back door while it bubbled. The running water left only a few droplets on the floor as the flow was broken by his return. Thomas was already tearing the fresh herbs in his hands as he crossed the kitchen, and he dropped them into the pot when he reached it and tossed away the stripped stems.

"Let it boil," he said, not even looking at where Cora stood by uselessly on his way back out of the room and toward the stairs.

The flame under the cauldron faltered a little as Cora frowned after him. Thomas had been surly since the minute she'd met him, but he was even worse now. It had only been a day since they arrived—was he that unhappy to be back at his family home, or had she really overstepped her bounds by demanding to stay with him? It would be a lot harder to help him if he wouldn't talk to her.

Thomas did emerge from his locked bedroom when the smell of the cooking stew had permeated the whole house, and he paused in the kitchen doorway at the sight of the carefully laid pairs of silverware and cups at the long wooden table. Cora was scooping two large servings into the ceramic bowls she'd found in a cupboard and thoroughly cleaned, and she started slightly to see her host lurking in the entrance.

"I was just about to call you," she said with a smile. "It seems like it's ready." She rose from the covered cauldron and carried the bowls to the table, where she set them adjacent to each other and stood aside from the seat at the head of the table. "I thought you might like to have a real meal," she offered. "I know we've been on the road and things have been crazy, and you seem whatever the opposite of stoked is to be staying here, and even less happy about me hanging around, so...I figured an actual dinner might make it feel a little more like home."

Thomas hesitated, his eyes darting from the waiting bowl and to the back door as though he might have to bolt from the threat of companionship. Cora tried not to look too hopeful as his gaze landed on her. She wanted to help, and it would be so much easier if Thomas would tell her how.

He watched her uncertainly for a few beats, but then he said, “Thank you,” and crossed the room to take the seat beside her.

Cora poured them both some water, since that was all they had, and sat down to scoop some of the stew into her mouth. “Not bad for a colonial meal,” she said once she had swallowed, but Thomas didn’t smile. Cora frowned at the side of his head and chewed her next mouthful in silence. He finally looked over at her after she had been staring at him for an increasingly awkward amount of time.

“What?” he asked with his spoon halfway to his lips.

“Don’t you know how to make conversation?”

He gave a small sigh through his nose and set down his spoon. “What do you want to talk about?”

“What are we doing here, for one thing? You said something about your contacts helping people, right? So what does that mean? What can I do to help?”

“I’ve been talking to some people I know in Ottawa, and New York, Los Angeles—trying to keep an ear to the ground for signs of what’s coming. It must be a massive undertaking, setting up the infrastructure for this order they’re planning, but so far I’ve heard very little. There’s next to no information coming out of the Magistrate about *how* they’re going to actually pull this off.”

“Is that good? Does it mean it’s not happening, or they’re having trouble?”

Thomas shook his head and dropped his gaze to his bowl. “It probably means that people are simply going to disappear, and we aren’t going to have any way to track them.”

“Then...that’s what Nathan and Elton are for, right? You said they could send people back here, and we’d help them.”

“That’s assuming they’re able to get to anyone before they’re gone. For right now, all I can do is listen and try to move some friends who are guaranteed to need relocating.”

“So what can I do?”

“Nothing, probably.”

“Come on, Thomas,” she sighed. “Everything’s easier with help. I’ll never know what I’m doing if you don’t let me learn.”

“I don’t think you have the magic,” he answered simply, and she immediately bristled and dropped her spoon to the table with a soft clunk.

“You think just because I’m young, I can’t do anything? Did *you* get private instruction from a witch the Magistrate has been trying to catch for like, three hundred years? Did *you* break us out of jail?”

Thomas recoiled slightly from her accusing face. “I—didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, you did,” she cut him off. “And you’re wrong. I can learn, if you can teach me. And I want you to teach me.”

The man’s expression softened, just a little, and he considered her for a moment before he nodded. “All right. We’ll see.”

Cora smiled at him. “I’m gonna surprise you,” she promised.

“I don’t like surprises.”

“Well tough luck,” she laughed. She picked up her spoon again and took another bite. “So do you want to tell me how you ended up in Canada if your family is from Massachusetts?”

The look on Thomas’s face told her that the answer was no, but he answered anyway. “My father’s family is from Massachusetts,” he corrected her. “My mother was from Vancouver.”

“Was?” Cora asked in a gentler voice, and Thomas returned his attention to his soup.

“Was. They’re both dead now.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It wasn’t unexpected,” Thomas said flatly, but when Cora tilted her head at him, he pushed his bowl away and stood from the table. “Thank you for cooking dinner,” he went on before she could continue the conversation. “If you just leave it, I’ll be down to clean up later. Don’t knock on my door again tonight,” he added in a quiet, firm voice, and then he was gone, his footsteps disappearing up the wooden stairs.

Cora puffed out her cheeks in a sigh and mushed her face with her hands as she leaned her elbows on the table. She guessed that went about as well as she could have expected.

6

Elton had his suit jacket slung over his arm and his tie loosened within minutes of stepping out of the cab into the desert heat of Nevada. He had only managed to get spotty sleep while waiting in the Mexico City airport and with Nathan carelessly dozing against his shoulder on the plane, and now the morning sun felt so oppressive that he accepted the stolen pair of sunglasses Nathan offered him when they passed a tourist shop on the street. He stood outside a coffee shop on the strip and tried to finish waking himself up by alternating sips of coffee and pulls from a cigarette while Nathan leaned over the table with his phone open to a webpage full of photos.

“You can’t tell me we aren’t staying somewhere fabulous in *fabulous Las Vegas*, darling,” Nathan complained. “It’s on the sign.”

“We’re here for one night, maybe two, while we find Thomas’s people. We’re not moving in.”

“I want to stay in the pyramid one.”

“Nathan—”

“It has a slanted elevator.”

“I don’t care about elevators.”

“There’s a sphinx outside, Elton!”

“Don’t care about sphinxes, either,” the blond sighed before taking a long drink of coffee. “I do care about getting caught doing the same shit you’ve been doing since you were born. How long do you think it’s going to take Korshunov to track us down if we don’t act smart?”

Nathan looked up at him with a petulant frown on his face. “We’re here for one night, maybe two,” he repeated in a mockery of Elton’s deeper voice. “We can enjoy ourselves and move along. Come on,” he said as he stood, tucking his phone back into his pocket and carrying his coffee with him as he started down the street. “I’m not carting this luggage all over town.”

Elton called after him, but the other man didn’t turn back, so he put out his cigarette, gave a soft curse, and followed.

The room they ended up in was actually surprisingly simple for Nathan’s standards, with sleek brown décor decorated with hieroglyphic script and sharply slanted walls that served as a reminder of the odd shape of the hotel.

Elton sighed as he dropped his suitcase near the blue plush sofa. “You couldn’t have asked for one with two beds?”

“They didn’t have any corner suites with two beds. Besides, I get cold at night,” Nathan teased.

Elton was already ignoring him, taking a seat on the couch to dig out the notebook Thomas had given him and flip through to the page he needed.

“Do you gamble, Elton?” Nathan called from the next room, where he was already running the faucet to fill the giant soaking tub by the bed with hot water.

“I’m traveling with you, aren’t I?” the blond answered without looking up. He heard Nathan’s snort of laughter and briefly shut his eyes to sigh as the water sloshed in the tub. “Why are you getting in the bath? We have work to do.”

“I’ll be ready in two shakes as soon as you figure out where we’re going.”

“According to Thomas’s notes, we’re looking for Lily and Charles Walker,” Elton said over the sound of the filling bath, refusing to approach and be forced to look Nathan in the face while he lounged naked in a Jacuzzi. “Lily works at the Bellagio, he thinks. He has an address for them but says he hasn’t heard from them in a while, so it may be outdated.”

“Stop number one, then?”

“I guess so.”

The faucet scraped softly as Nathan shut the water off. “And then the casino.”

“Then definitely *not* the casino. Then somewhere we can draw the circle and get these people back to Thomas.”

“Then the casino?”

“Never the casino. Get out of there; it’s time to go.”

“Come on, Elton,” Nathan groaned. Elton could tell from the splashing sound that he was slumped forward to pout over the edge of the bathtub. “You know if you don’t come with me, I’m just going to go on my own. You’ll leave me unsupervised?”

Elton frowned down at the notebook on his lap. Nathan was right. Even if he did forbid it, Nathan would pretend to cooperate and then slip off at the first opportunity. Then he’d be left to look all over Las Vegas for the biggest disturbance of the peace and hope he found Nathan there.

“Fine,” he agreed. “*After* we’ve safely returned the Walkers, and *if* everything has gone smoothly, *then* I will go with you to the casino. For a little while.”

Nathan disturbed the water again as he stood, and Elton finally did look up as the other man appeared, leaning around the corner with a sly smile on his face and his fingers drumming on the wall. “Will you blow on my dice for good luck, darling?”

“Put on pants, please,” Elton sighed.

Nathan sucked his teeth at him and called him a tease, but he did as he was told.

The apartment complex where the taxi dropped them off was made of flat and unattractive grey stucco, each terra cotta-colored door facing inward to a dusty courtyard surrounded by a chain-link fence. As soon as Nathan touched the metal gate, he paused and glanced back to Elton.

“Do you feel that?”

The heat radiating from the gate wasn't caused by only the sun. Elton had sensed this kind of barrier upon approaching the homes of many *dorche*-practicing witches during his time with the Magistrate. He'd regularly set them himself. They were used to block detecting and seeking spells, but they were also glamours, of a kind—they blinded mundanes that came too near to the real goings-on within. Elton had seen mundanes walk right by, oblivious as other witches fought to set themselves free from his

bindings. The wall always gave a certain sort of tingle in your skin that set him on edge. Nothing hidden behind this barrier would be good.

“There may already be Chasers here,” Elton said, which brought a smile to Nathan's face.

“Let's hope so,” he chuckled, and he pushed the gate open. The barrier gave him no pause as he passed through it, but he did stop just inside the courtyard with Elton behind him. Beyond the cloak of the spell, the quiet courtyard was a mess. One of the apartment doors—Elton guessed the one that was their destination—had a large, ragged hole in the center covered by clear plastic and duct tape, and bits of wood and ceramic littered the pathway outside. A bit of smoke seemed to be leaking from the rear window of the building, but the apartment itself was quiet. Nathan approached the door without hesitation and bent to peer through the plastic patch as he rang the doorbell, which gave a pitiful, dying chime at his touch. The quiet sounds of movement from inside went silent at once, and Elton could almost feel the occupants holding their breath.

“Hello there!” Nathan called with his face almost touching the plastic in the door. “Everyone alive?”

A woman's exhausted face appeared in the window nearest the door, a worried frown on her face and her knuckles tight around the curtains she held aside.

“You Chasers?” she asked, muffled by the window pane.

“She's looking at you, darling,” Nathan said with a sidelong smirk at Elton, but he leaned over to smile at the woman and lifted his hand in a wave. “Are you Lily Walker? We're sent by Mr. Proctor.”

“Oh, thank God,” the woman groaned, and she disappeared just long enough to open the door on its precarious hinges. “Please come in. We need help.”

“That's why we're here,” Elton said, but as he followed Nathan through the door, he hesitated. The furniture inside the apartment was in disarray, dirty dishes filled the sink, and the carpet looked singed in more than a few places. “What happened in here?”

“It's Grace,” she answered. “Our daughter. She's—” The woman lifted her hands and dropped them back to her sides as though the room itself should be explanation enough. “She's got magic. And she can't control it. Charlie has been trying to help her, but she's just—”

A bang from the next room cut her off, and she darted toward the door just in time to catch a toy tow truck before it crashed into the wall. She looked back at the men in her living room and gave a helpless huff. “She’s only seven,” Lily sighed. “Charlie said this doesn’t usually happen until they’re older?”

“Where is your husband now?” Elton asked, sidestepping a broken scooter as he crossed the room with Nathan behind him.

“He’s in the bedroom. He has to rest a lot to keep this barrier up, he says.” She leaned back to glance down the hallway. “I don’t know about any of this stuff,” she added in a softer voice. “I wish I could do more to help. But every sneeze, every laugh, every temper tantrum—she’s breaking things, and things are getting turned into other things, and—”

Nathan put a hand on the woman’s shoulder, and she slumped slightly and looked up at him with a plaintive frown.

“We’ll get her sorted,” he promised. “And we’ll get you all somewhere safe.” He looked over his shoulder at Elton, who looked very uncomfortable in the disaster that was the living room. “If you could take charge of this barrier, darling—give our host a little break. I’ll see to the girl.”

Elton nodded, already reaching into his breast pocket for his portfolio, and he set a few blank slips of yellowed paper on the scant spare foot of empty space on the nearby counter, then set to drawing the right inscriptions while Nathan followed the haggard mother down the hall.

The young girl’s bedroom was in no better condition than the rest of the house. Her dresser was missing a few drawers, which laid upside down or sideways on the floor—Nathan assumed where they’d been left the last time the whole thing had tipped over. A small fountain stood where a lamp should have been, dripping water down the side of the nightstand, and the ceiling fan blades seemed to have melted, but they still turned, limply flopping in a rhythmic rotation. From the bed in the corner, a small girl sat with her knees to her chest and her hands tucked under her bare feet, staring at the stranger in her room with wide, brown eyes.

“Grace,” Lily began in a voice that sounded practiced and gentle, “this man is here to help you.”

The girl’s timid gaze flitted quickly to her mother and back to the visitor, but she didn’t speak.

“Hello, Grace.” Nathan approached her without hesitation and took a seat near the foot of her bed. “My name is Nathan.” He glanced up at the

ceiling fan and lifted one finger in a brief circle to indicate the room. "Did you do all of this?"

She nodded.

"Well isn't that something? You know, when I was your age, I was barely floating apples off the ground. It was a long while before I was doing anything so exciting as destroying furniture."

The girl let a hint of a guilty smile touch her lips as she ducked her face a little closer to her knees.

"Has any of this been on purpose, Grace? Or was it all accidents?"

Large brown eyes darted toward the corner of the room, where a small dollhouse sat unbroken, with tall, mismatched spires growing in disjointed angles from its plastic rooftops. Nathan followed her gaze and leaned back to rest his elbow on her mattress as he craned his neck over his shoulder.

"I wanted it to be bigger," Grace whispered.

"And so it is," he chuckled. "That's excellent. That means that all you're missing is restraint. Do you know that word, Grace—restraint?"

She shook her head.

"Well, restraint is knowing that you *can* do something, but that you *shouldn't*. It's knowing the right time and place for things. For instance, you wouldn't wear your favorite dress into the bathtub, would you? Or somersault down the hall at school?"

The girl hid her soft giggle in her knees. "No."

"No," Nathan echoed, leaning in closer to her to keep her gaze and match her smile. "And just as such, using magic is sometimes something that you should do, and sometimes something that you shouldn't. What has your father been doing with you to help?"

"He makes me practice stuff," Grace answered. She pointed across the bed to a toppled stack of blocks. "I try to stack them. He says it will help me focus."

"He's very right. But I suspect that *not* doing magic is more the concern your mother has, do you think?" Nathan winked at the anxious woman with a smile, at which she fervently nodded. Elton stood beside her now, eyeing Nathan and the girl warily but remaining silent.

Nathan sat up straight on the bed and scooted slightly closer to the small girl, flattening his hands on his knees as he looked at her. "So. With that in mind, I'd like to try a little experiment. Would you help me do that?"

"Okay."

“Wonderful. Now, what I’m going to do is I’m going to scare you. Just a little bit. To see what happens. Just a little ‘boo,’ do you understand? You even know it’s coming, so it won’t be so bad. And I want you to try not to let any magic slip out.”

She nodded.

“Shut your eyes, please, Grace.”

The girl did as she was told, her arms tightening into straightness beside her legs in anticipation. Nathan waited patiently for a while, fingers drumming on his knees, until Grace seemed to settle into her place again. Then he reached out a hand toward her and sent a tiny spark from his fingertip to her chin. She gave a yelp and jerked away from him, and the light bulb in her drooping ceiling fan popped and went dark. The girl’s mother let out a startled shout, but Nathan only laughed as he ducked away from the sound.

“Well that wasn’t as bad as it could have been, was it? Very good, Grace.”

She bit her lip to keep her giggle inside.

“Did you feel that, inside here?” Nathan touched a single finger to her chest near her collarbone as she finally relaxed into a cross-legged seat. “Just a little tug, like a string pulling outwards?”

Grace splayed her hand on her chest. “It feels like my heartbeat,” she said, and Nathan nodded.

“That’s precisely what it is,” he whispered, leaning conspiratorially close. “The magic inside you is what makes your heart pound and your blood pump unlike any other person on this Earth. It’s one of the few things in the world that is truly *yours*—even your name you might share with others, but this magic can never be duplicated. So it’s important for you to protect it. And you can’t very well protect it if you’re letting it fly around the room every time you sneeze, can you?”

“I guess not.”

“No. It’s going to take a lot of practice, but I think I can give you something that will help keep that magic inside until you mean to let it out.”

“Really?”

“Really. Would you like that?”

“I would! Yes please!”

Nathan looked up at a sound in the doorway and offered a smile to the man who entered looking disheveled and worn. Lily put a hand on the

man's arm with a trace of hope on her face, but he was staring at Nathan with the same wide brown eyes his daughter had. He reached out toward his wife, easing her behind him slowly as if not wanting to startle a wild animal, and he glanced to his daughter, who sat happily beside Nathan on the bed.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked, clearly making an effort to keep his voice steady.

"I'm hoping to help little Grace here stop ruining your house," Nathan chuckled. "Charles, right? Or may I call you Charlie?"

"Grace, honey—come here," he said instead of answering. "Now," he insisted when she stared at him in confusion, and the girl clambered out of bed and to his side.

"Charlie, what's going on?" Lily asked with her hand on her husband's sleeve. "They said Thomas sent them here."

"Get out of my house," he pressed, not taking his eyes off of Nathan. "Both of you."

"I think we've had a misunderstanding," Nathan said. He stood without closing any distance between them and spread his hands as if them being empty made him any less of a threat.

Lily glanced between the two men, uncertain now. "He's helping Grace."

"Did you forget the paper I brought home? The *wanted poster* from the Magistrate? With this person's face on it?!"

The woman's expression dropped, and she went a little pale as she held her husband's gaze. Her fingers tightened on the fabric of his shirt.

"Mr. Walker—" Elton began, but Nathan held up a hand to stay his protest.

"We have limited time," he said. "I'm not here to harm you, but the Chasers behind me will be."

The man hesitated, his protective hand firm on his daughter's shoulder. "What Chasers?"

"I come with bad tidings, I'm afraid," Nathan went on. "Mr. Proctor has sent me to relocate you and your family before the Magistrate does. They're onto you, and your daughter is somewhat attention-drawing."

"Why the hell should I believe you? How do I know you haven't killed Thomas?"

"Why on Earth would I?" Nathan laughed. "Use your head, man."

“I understand your worry,” Elton cut in. “But we really are here to help. Thomas has given us instructions to get you to him so that he can move you again. The Magistrate is about to execute an Order that will mean death sentences for anyone like you and your daughter. We want to get you out of here before that can happen.”

Charles looked down into his wife’s anxious face and frowned as his daughter peered up at him. Elton gave him the few moments he needed to weigh his choices, and when the man looked up again, he offered the blond a small nod.

“Okay. I’m not sure I believe you—but I can’t risk being wrong.”

“A wise decision,” Nathan said. “Now let’s get a move on. Charlie, if you’ll give Elton here a hand moving some furniture, I can get to drawing this circle.”

“Can I help?” Lily offered as the two men moved down the hallway, and Nathan smiled at her.

“You pack up whatever you’d like to bring with you, and keep track of this little firework,” he answered, crouching down to look Grace in the eyes. “I’m going to bring you a charm like I promised, Grace. In the meantime, I want you to practice thinking quietly. Just shut your eyes, count slowly to five and then back down again. If you get distracted, just take a breath and start again. Try to feel quiet, hm? While I help your dad.”

The girl nodded, a determined furrow in her brow, and she sat down on her little rug with her mother nearby, shut her eyes, and softly counted. Nathan pushed up on his knees to stand and kicked aside a stray laundry basket as he reached the living room. The others had moved the couch to the far wall and stacked the coffee table upside down on the cushions, and the few remaining stray toys had been pushed into a pile in the corner. Nathan eyed the space for a moment, drawing in the air with his finger, and then set to work on his hands and knees, tracing burns into the carpet with the small, bright flame in his palm. Elton crouched down to help him fill in the correct markings once the outer ring was complete, and Nathan soon left him to finish it on his own and approached the awkwardly waiting man of the house instead.

“Charlie—mind if I have a look through your supplies? What have you got on hand in the way of stones, oils, et cetera?”

“Why?”

“For Grace. I want to make her something to help her control her magic.”

The man paused, his lips twitching into an uncertain frown. “A dampener?”

“Not exactly. Please.”

Charles took another second to glance at Elton, carefully burning ancient letters and symbols into the carpet of his apartment, then let out a short sigh and seemed resigned to the day ahead of him. He beckoned Nathan to follow him and allowed him access to his small cabinet of ingredients, which the wanted and dangerous witch picked and tutted at with alternating approval and judgment. When he was satisfied, Nathan returned to the living room and sat on the arm of the damaged sofa, slicking a thin cord with oils from his fingertips and stringing a few bits of wood and small stones into a circle.

“Don’t help, or anything,” Elton muttered from the floor as he paused to check the picture on his phone and ensure he hadn’t missed anything in this section of the circle.

“I am helping,” Nathan answered without looking up. He rose to fetch a small knife from the kitchen and returned to his place to begin carving lines into a thin silver coin. When he’d finished, he attached it to the little bracelet like a pendant and stepped over Elton’s working hands on his way back to the girl’s bedroom. He crouched on the floor to offer it to her.

“Will this make me not do magic anymore?” the girl asked, clutching the miniature rosary to her chest with both small hands.

“This will help you focus,” he corrected. He turned the silver token in her fingers to draw her attention to the carvings. He had made a simple picture of two mirrored snakes, tongues flicking, with a sharp, star-topped totem between them. “This is Danbala and his wife, Ayida-Wedo. He and his wife bring calm and comfort to those who ask. If you ask, they will help you to stay calm, too.”

“The snakes?” Grace asked with a suspicious narrowing of her eyes. “But snakes are gross.”

“Snakes are animals, just like you. And *these* snakes will help you stop giving your mother so much trouble. So whenever you need to quiet yourself, just touch this token and ask for their help.”

She nodded, already running her thumb over the crude carvings in the metal, and Nathan gave her head a soft pat as he stood. He took the small

suitcase from Lily's hand when he met her in the hallway and set it down inside the completed circle in the living room carpet. Elton was already on the phone, presumably with Thomas, but Charles still stood off to one side looking reluctant and suspicious.

"What did you give her?" he demanded in a hiss.

Nathan raised his hands in mock surrender and lowered his voice. "Steady on, dad. It's just a trinket. Nothing but some lavender oil and tokens. You and I both know that the only thing that's going to help her is practice and time—but this will help her believe she can do it."

The man stared at him without answering, but then he softened and let the first hint of a smile touch his face.

"Is everyone ready?" Elton called with his phone still to his ear. "Thomas is waiting."

Lily rushed down the hall to fetch her daughter and handed another suitcase off to her husband, and then the pair of them stepped into the small empty space at the center of the circle. Grace hesitated to enter, but a soft touch of Nathan's hand to her back urged her across the dark lines in the carpet.

"I'm sorry for how I acted," Charles spoke up, both hands holding his daughter close to him by the shoulders. "Thank you for helping us. You're...not the person I thought you were."

"Oh, don't be fooled," Nathan chuckled. "I'm probably definitely whoever you thought I was, or worse. ...But you're welcome," he added after a brief pause.

A loud bang startled everyone in the room, and Nathan turned to look through the plastic barrier in the front door. A man and a woman stood with their palms flat against the door, working against the talismans Elton had placed to keep them out. Nathan's eyes went immediately to the silver rings they both wore. "Better tell Mr. Proctor to be quick, darling. We're out of time."

At Elton's word, the marks on the floor began to send up wisps of smoke. Grace flinched away, but her father held her tight.

"Be good, Grace," Nathan called over his shoulder, unwilling to take his eyes from the Chasers outside. The glowing, toxic green began to show as though through splinters in the circle itself, and just as the door to the apartment gave way, a sharp crack filled the room, and a thin, black smoke dervish rose to pool near the ceiling, leaving an empty circle.

Elton tossed his phone away onto the couch and slipped a fresh talisman from his pocket. Maybe just once, things would go quietly and according to plan, but that apparently wasn't today.

A bloody nose, a sore shoulder, and a knocked-clean kitchen counter later, Elton stood beside Nathan over the bodies of the two intruding Chasers and tried to catch his breath. Nathan didn't have a scratch on him—he'd had enough practice taking on the Magistrate, Elton supposed—but for as many scraps as Elton had been in, this volume of cold-blooded murder was still relatively new to him. The sight of the corpses at his feet, however, limbs splayed unnaturally and blood drying on their lips, added no weight to his shoulders. If he and Nathan hadn't killed these Chasers, they would certainly have been killed themselves, or at least arrested. And Elton had been put in a cell for the last time.

"Well," Nathan said in a huff, pulling Elton from his thoughts, "I'm a bit sad that wasn't Korshunov, honestly."

"I could do without seeing him again." Elton rolled his shoulder, wincing faintly at the twinge the muscle gave. Cora had done her best to heal it, but a lack of rest and the severity of the bite from Korshunov's beast meant it may never return to its full strength. He would just have to adjust.

"I'm sure he'll catch up to us eventually. In any case," he went on, clapping the blond on the shoulder, "you said you'd come to the casino."

Elton stared at him. "I said I would come if everything went smoothly. We just killed two people."

"But the family is gone!" Nathan protested, spreading his hands to gesture toward the empty room. "They're safe! That's as smooth as it gets around here. Come on," he prodded. He stepped closer to touch his chin to the taller man's shoulder. "Come to the casino. Come on."

"Oh my god," Elton sighed. "Okay. Fine. *One night* in the casino. Tomorrow, we leave. We need to find this Magister that Marquez sent us after."

"Deal," Nathan agreed immediately. He led the way through the broken front door and into the courtyard, trusting the other man to follow him. "Then it's time to gamble."

"What's the draw?" Elton gathered up his phone and jacket and stepped over the threshold into the sun. "All you're doing is wasting money."

"Most people feel a draw toward winning, I should think," Nathan pointed out. They walked the pavement side by side to put some distance

between themselves and the scene of their crimes. As they reached the corner, Nathan took his phone from his pocket to find them a ride.

“That would be fine if they weren’t all games of chance.”

“Well you clearly need to learn to have fun for fun’s sake, darling. It’s all glamourised money anyway, so just enjoy the game. But first, a drink. Or two.”

“Nathan, I’m not drinking with you.”

“Oh look here, Elton; the car’s coming already.”

“Nathan.”

“Hurry along, darling. Don’t keep him waiting.”

Elton’s jaw clenched in irritation as the other man walked farther down the sidewalk without him and opened the back door of their car, tapping the roof to urge Elton along. He sighed through his nose and stalked after his companion with a weariness much heavier than murder weighing him down.

7

The dusty Salem house was chilly in the morning, making it a little difficult for Cora to spread the butter on her bread. She couldn't even toast it effectively. She sat at the heavy dining table and chewed in silence, only perking up when she heard the creak and snap of Thomas's door closing upstairs. She waited for his footsteps to reach the landing and leaned over the table as he passed the doorway to the kitchen.

"You said you'd teach me stuff!" she called, but he didn't stop walking.

"Later," his flat voice echoed.

Cora slumped down on the table again as the heavy cellar door dropped shut, no doubt sealing Thomas in just as securely as before. She passed some time playing a game on her phone, and she texted Nathan without receiving an answer, but soon she was face down on the table with her phone cast aside and her arms laid carelessly ahead of her, groaning in frustration into the centuries-old wood.

She passed the hidden entrance to the cellar and scowled at it, hoping that Thomas could feel her disdain. The house had a decent-sized library with a few plush-if-rickety chairs, but all of the books she skimmed with her fingertips were dry and boring. Oddly-specific histories, a couple of threadbare novels and memoirs of people she'd never heard of. This was

supposed to be a creepy colonial witch house, wasn't it? So where were they hiding all the good stuff?

A thought tingled the back of her neck, and she paused with her hand still on a book to lean forward toward the door. Maybe Thomas kept the good stuff in his room. She moved to the doorway and stopped to listen, her eyes locked on the spot of floor where she'd once or twice seen the cellar door appear. Like a cat afraid of being caught in motion, she crept from the library toward the stairs, pausing every few steps to strain her ears for signs of movement. She made it all the way up the stairs and put her hand on the worn brass knob of Thomas's bedroom door, then waited one last time, giving herself the courage to turn it.

It was locked, of course.

Muttering a curse under her breath, she glanced over her shoulder once more and then crouched by the door to whisper her spell into the lock. As soon as it clicked, she slipped inside and eased the door shut behind her, flinching at even the soft noise the movement made.

Thomas's bedroom was about as spartan as she expected. His suitcase sat unpacked in the corner of the room beside the small dresser, and a heavy trunk lay at the foot of the neatly-made bed. The drapes allowed little natural light to enter the room, but she didn't dare push them open and leave a sign of her snooping. No sign of personality existed here, but the short bookshelf to one side of the bed caught her eye. She tiptoed over and sat down on the floor to examine the spines. These books were even older than the ones in the library, and they looked well-read. The majority were in languages Cora could recognize but not read—Latin, Greek, Hebrew—and none of them had labels or titles on the covers. These looked like proper grimoires, at least, even if she couldn't decipher them—yet.

One book at the bottom corner of the shelf drew her attention. It was bound in pale, stained leather held together by thick, sinuous thread. Red lettering that she couldn't identify marked the spine, and as she carefully plucked it from its place, the leather seemed to warm quickly under her touch. The pages were thick like handmade parchment; she took her time turning each one for fear of damaging it. It was handwritten inside in Hebrew and Greek, and the passages were interspersed with inscriptions of summoning circles, pentagrams, and various other demonic-looking things, but in the later pages, the handwriting was neater—slower, somehow, and each sheet bore a delicate, perfect drawing of an herb, flower, or cross-cut

stone. She ran her fingertips slowly over the ink and found herself faintly smiling.

“What are you doing in here?”

Cora shrieked and scrambled to hold onto the book in her hands, scurrying back toward the wall on instinct. Thomas stood in the doorway, staring at her with a tight-lipped frown. She hadn’t heard him come up the stairs, and the door had made no sound.

“Jesus Christ,” she sighed, letting the book drop back into her lap. “You scared the shit out of me!”

“What. Are you doing. In here.”

“I wasn’t doing anything!” she countered, though she felt a little small under his stony expression. “I just wanted to see the books. You said you’d teach me, but then you just disappeared into the cellar like always!”

“So you broke into my room.”

“Well,” Cora started, the protest momentarily dying on her lips as guilt twisted her stomach. She did her best to crush the feeling and replace it with indignation instead. “What am I supposed to do? Just sit on my hands all day?”

A restrained sigh slipped from Thomas, but he didn’t raise his voice. “Do you even know what you’re holding?”

Cora quirked an eyebrow at him. “A...book?”

“That’s human leather.”

She recoiled instantly, the book falling from her hands and landing face down on the floor. “Oh, fucking gross, Thomas!”

“Oh, for—it’s *also* irreplaceable!” He reached down to snatch it up before it could settle on its bent pages and smoothed the parchment with his palm.

“Sorry!”

“Just get out.” His voice was a little more strained now, as if it was getting harder for him not to shout. “I said you could stay, but I didn’t say you could invade my privacy and go through my things.”

Cora stood slowly like a guilty child and took a few steps toward the door, but she lingered just inside the room. “You said you would teach me. What are you doing down there by yourself all the time, anyway?”

“Minding my own business, mostly,” he answered without turning around.

She sighed harshly and lifted her hands, letting them slap back to her thighs in exasperation. “Thomas, come on,” she said. “You were almost friendly last night, for a second. I want to help these people as badly as you do. Show me how. Please,” she added, trying to sound a little softer.

Thomas shut the book gently and went still. “You can’t do what I do, Cora.”

The young woman snorted at him. “Says fuckin’ *who*, man? What makes you so special? You’re human, aren’t you? So let me try!”

He didn’t reply right away. She could see the tension in his shoulders, but then it slowly eased, and he knelt down to set the book back in its place on the shelf. “I need to go into town for supplies,” he finally said. “You can help me carry them.”

“Help you *carry*—”

“We’ll get things that you’ll need, too.”

She blinked up at him as he turned to face her at last, her cheeks heating faintly. “Oh,” she said, hoping it sounded enough like a careless scoff. “Well okay then.”

“Now get out of my room. Let’s go.”

Thomas closed and locked the door behind them and led her down the stairs to the front door, scooping up a small leather satchel on his way and slinging it over one shoulder. He didn’t speak to her while they waited for their Lyft, or during the entire ride into town, but the driver had the radio on, at least, so it wasn’t completely silent and weird the whole way. The scenery was rocky, all steep cliffs and tall, gnarled trees that occasionally gave way to brief views of the distant waters of the Atlantic. It looked cold—a fitting landscape for the chilled winds that swept down the streets toward the town.

The car dropped them off at the end of a pedestrian street paved with red stones and lined with restaurants, shops, cafes, and even a couple of tattoo parlors. Cora walked a few steps behind Thomas in an attempt to take everything in, but he wasn’t slowing down for her. The only pause he took was to answer the greeting of a man in filthy clothes and pass him some folded money with a brief nod.

He finally stopped in front of a store with a flat concrete front, its windows hung with various runes made of twine and twigs in between bunches of drying herbs. A wooden sign above the window read “Witch City Wares” in black-burned letters, and a number of baskets sat in the

windowsill. A tiny bell chimed as Thomas pushed the door open, and the scent of oils filled Cora's nostrils as soon as she stepped inside. The lighting in the shop was dim, and the whole place was fragrant and cozy—candles of every color filled an entire shelf beside others lined with bottles of oils and stacks of incense, and glass cases formed the counter, stocked with jewelry and bones and stone runes and leather-bound books. Stacked baskets held feathers, wrapped sage, scraps of labeled wood and piles of sorted stones. It gave her the same sort of crowded, magic-filled feeling as Nathan's old apartment used to, and she smiled and hugged her elbows to keep from touching everything in reach.

"Can we live here instead?" she asked quietly, but Thomas didn't answer her.

He seemed immune to the shop's charms; he made his way to the counter without a word and retrieved a silver dollar sized wooden coin from the pocket of his cardigan, which he set gently on the counter between himself and the woman attending the register. The visible surface of the wood showed a carving like a flower made by a compass, which drew a sharp inhale from the older woman behind the glass counter. She looked down at the coin with an uneasy frown on her lips, then looked back up at Thomas without fully raising her head. She spared a glance at the few other customers wandering the shop before she spoke in a low voice.

"Where did you get this?"

"It's a family heirloom," Thomas said dryly.

"Is that so," the woman murmured. She took a step closer to the counter and tilted her head at him, spilling a few heavy locks of loose blonde curls over her shoulder. "Haven't seen one of you here in a long time. We'd started to think you were all dead."

"Not yet. Can I buy from you?"

"From what I have, sure." The woman's pale eyes flicked over to the young woman at Thomas's side and narrowed faintly. "Who is this?"

"She's mine," Thomas answered easily. "Show me what you have, please." Cora looked up at his profile, a little taken aback by how easily he claimed ownership over her, but she let it go without comment.

"This way," the woman said. Thomas tucked his token back into his pocket and followed the woman around to the back of the shop, through a door and up a set of narrow wooden stairs. They waited while she unlocked the door at the top with a sturdy iron key, and Cora squinted in the faint

light of the single wire-strung bulb hanging from the ceiling. A few silk-covered tables filled the room, the black cloth sprinkled with various herbs. The room felt colder than the rest of the shop despite being upstairs, and Cora got the distinct feeling that she shouldn't touch anything.

"What are you looking for?" the shopkeeper asked, and Thomas scanned the covered tables as though he could tell what lay underneath the silk.

"I need the lónchi, and the macháiri me mávri laví. Hemlock and mercury. Do you have animals?"

Cora narrowed her eyes at him uncertainly while the woman pulled back one of the cloths to reveal a narrow silver knife and matching spadelike blade. "Animals?" she whispered.

"I can get them," the shop owner answered. "What do you need?"

"Magpie. And black cat. No stipulations."

Cora reached up to tug on the sleeve of his sweater. "What do you need animals for, Thomas?"

He didn't look at her. "Can you have them to the house by tonight?"

"I should be able to." She turned from him to carefully wrap his chosen blades in herbs and spare silk and handed him the bundle in exchange for the money he passed to her. "Do you mean the house I think you mean?"

"It hasn't moved." Thomas tucked the cloth wrapping into the bag at his hip, then urged Cora back down the stairs and slid the satchel from his shoulder and handed it off to her. "Here. You're helping."

She took the bag automatically, glancing down at it for a moment before opening her mouth to protest.

"Now what do *you* need?" he asked, cutting her off before her argument could begin.

"Oh." She paused near the counter, holding Thomas's bag in both hands. "I don't...really know, I guess."

"Well what is it that you do? What's your specialty?"

She pursed her lips. "I guess...I don't have one? I know some things that I learned in school, and Nathan gave me my bracelet." She lifted her wrist to show him the charms around her wrist. "So I can do some things he's taught me. I'm getting pretty good at healing poultices. And Nathan was trying to get me to learn divination. He said I had a knack for it, but...I don't know."

"Divination is a rare skill. If you really do have a knack, you should nurture it. What have you tried?"

“Nathan had me use a candle and a mirror, and then a lake. The lake worked pretty well, but...I think it backfired somehow.” She peeked around at the other shoppers nearby before looking back at him. “It didn’t go well afterward; put it that way.” She wasn’t willing to talk about Chasers and forest monsters out loud in public, even in a Salem witch shop.

Thomas nodded without pressing for detail. “A lake is a good choice, but not very practical.” He leaned slightly to look around her and slipped past to reach a far shelf. He chose a flat obsidian disc, only about four inches wide, and handed it to her. “This is a scrying mirror. It serves the same purpose as the lake or the candle, and I can treat it to make it more effective for you.” Without waiting for a response, he turned from her again and began to pick out an assortment of herbs, oils, and stones, which he placed on the counter. Cora recognized most of them from her poultices and tonics but couldn’t name the purpose of them all.

She set down the scrying mirror and began to dig in her purse for her money—she wouldn’t try to glamour a witch shop—but she barely had her wallet in her hand before Thomas had paid and the woman behind the counter was packing up their purchases. Cora hesitated, wanting to protest that she wasn’t a child who needed things bought for her, but Thomas wasn’t even looking at her. He had offered to get the stuff in the first place, she guessed.

“Thanks,” she said instead, and she thought his face was just a little less grim as he handed the bag off to her. She happily carried Thomas’s bag on her shoulder and the shop bag in one hand as she followed him out, and she walked with him to the end of the street to wait for their car.

Rolling forward and backward on the balls of her feet, she stared at the side of his face for a while before speaking again. “So, are we going to talk about how weird it was in there?”

“It wasn’t weird.”

“It wasn’t weird? What was that thing you showed her? Why did she know you and where you live? What was all that ‘we thought you were all dead’ talk? What’s your deal, really? You are human, aren’t you? You’re not some secret monster who throws people in their murder cellar?”

A soft, sharp exhale that could almost have been mistaken for a hint of laughter escaped Thomas as he dropped his head slightly. “Yes. I’m human.”

“So then what?”

“I told you before—the name matters to some people. My family has lived here a long time. That’s all.”

“I guess that’s an answer. Most importantly, though, why do you need a knife and a black cat, Thomas?”

His thin frown returned, and he didn’t answer.

She edged closer to him and leaned in to whisper, “Is this demon stuff?”

Thomas snapped his gaze over to her. “It’s definitely not something we should be discussing here.”

Cora retreated under his glare and made a show of zipping her lips, which didn’t seem to amuse him. She stayed quiet on the drive back to the house, only greeting and thanking their driver, but as soon as they were back inside the creaky old home, she set their new supplies on the sofa and returned to her questioning as though there hadn’t been a solid half hour break.

“Elton said you summon demons,” she said.

Thomas walked past her and took his bag from the sofa, but he didn’t walk away from her this time.

“Is it true?”

“Yes,” he said after a moment’s hesitation. “Sort of. Really it’s only one.”

“He said it’s really dangerous.”

“Not for me.”

“Why not?” She took a seat on the sofa to listen. She left enough space for him, but he didn’t move to join her.

“I...have an arrangement with it.”

“An arrangement?” She frowned up at him. “Nathan uses that word. Does this demon possess you, too?”

“Not yet,” Thomas answered in a softer voice. He fidgeted with his bag as though it required his attention just to keep from meeting her gaze. “But someday, I suppose. In a way.”

“What does that mean? Is this a sold your soul to the devil situation?” she asked with a quiet laugh that died in her throat at the weary frown deepening on Thomas’s lips.

“Yes.” He took a short breath and finally turned his head to look at her. “I made a deal. In exchange for the abilities and knowledge the demon has given me, it gets...whatever is left of me when I die.”

“That’s crazy,” Cora breathed. “So have you...I mean, could you do the sort of thing Nathan does, if you wanted to? Become young again?”

“I doubt it would let me.” Thomas shook his head. “I have the time that I have. Thirty years—that’s how long I have to use these gifts. No more, and...no less,” he added, returning his eyes to the bag in his hands.

“Thirty years?” she echoed. “That’s it? Like, thirty years exactly, or...”

“June 14th, 2036.”

Cora sat back on the couch and stared up at him, mouth open in disbelief. “Thomas, I’m...I’m sorry.”

“It was my decision.”

“But still—”

“I told you because you asked, not because I wanted your sympathy,” he cut her off.

Cora watched him for a few beats of silence, chewing her bottom lip. It was bad enough to do the dangerous things that they did all the time, not knowing when something was going to go wrong and you might end up in a Magistrate cell or at the end of a noose, but to know the actual day of your death, and to know that some terrible spirit was waiting for you to fall into its open jaws—she couldn’t imagine.

“So,” she started quietly, “let me help. How I can. Teach me to help you.”

Thomas peeked back up at her, brow furrowed, but he seemed softer now. “Even knowing what I do?”

“I want to help you make the most of it. More work gets done with two, right?”

The faintest smile may have touched one corner of his lips as he nodded. “All right. But there’s a lot you need to know before you can enter the cellar. It won’t be pleasant while you’re down there. There are risks. You need to be sure that you’re prepared to do as I say—or I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“Jesus,” Cora murmured. “It’s that intense, huh?”

“Yes. So you need to be committed. I won’t blame you if you change your mind.”

She shook her head and stood from the sofa to face him properly. “Let’s do it. I can do as I’m told.”

“The last couple of days don’t bear that out.”

“Do you want help or what? Don’t be a shit.”

Thomas snorted softly and took a few steps toward the hidden cellar door before pausing. “First—are you on your period?”

She halted mid-step behind him. “What?”

“You won’t be able to enter if you’re impure.”

“My *period* makes me impure?” When Thomas only shrugged, she sighed. “No, I’m not.”

“When did you have sex last? Recently?”

Cora narrowed her eyes at him in suspicion. “Are you kidding me right now? Is this to get back at me for saying I needed your semen?”

He gestured toward the cellar. “I don’t make the rules, Cora.”

“How is this possibly—” She stopped and let out a quick huff, then lifted her hands in brief surrender before returning them to her hips. “Fine. Okay. No, I’m not on my period, and I guess the last time I had sex was...a couple weeks ago, maybe?”

“More than nine days?”

“Yeah, for sure.”

Cora expected some sort of reaction to the information that she’d been to bed with someone so recently—maybe judgment that she didn’t seem to be in a relationship, or at least curiosity about whether her partner had been one of her traveling companions, but Thomas only nodded and said, “All right. You’ll still need to be cleansed, but this is a good start.”

“Glad I’m not too impure to be around your *demon*,” she scoffed.

“You will be glad once you’re down there.” Thomas checked his watch and glanced back toward the closed cellar. “We’ll do it tonight. I need time to prepare. Can you behave yourself for a few hours?”

Cora tilted her head and offered him a teasing smirk. “I dunno; got anything good in your nightstand that you’re keeping from me?”

“Just more human skin for my bookbinding hobby.”

She snorted and shoved him lightly by the shoulder. “You’re gross. Go on into your weird demon cellar and get out of my face.”

Thomas hesitated just a moment, as if he had more to say, but then he pressed his lips together, gave a brief nod, and turned his back on her, crouching to run his hand over the floor and click the trap door open just enough to hook his fingers under. In another moment, the cellar snapped shut again, leaving only the smooth, dusty wooden floor.

8

The Aurora bar was on the casino floor of the Luxor hotel, the small seating area surrounded by chiming and blinking slot machines. Elton followed Nathan past the small tables and plush chairs decorated in red and gold and into the bar area proper, where glass lights hung from above in shimmering blue, green, and pink, their flowing movement mimicking the borealis namesake of the bar itself. Tall stools with red leather seats lined the bar, and Nathan led them beyond where video screens sat at intervals in the slick black bartop and took a seat near the end.

The bartender approached them and laid down a pair of square napkins for them as she smiled.

“Evening, gentlemen,” she offered brightly. “What can I get for you?”

“A dark and stormy, with Mount Gay if you have it, please, dear,” Nathan said, leaning his elbows on the edge of the bar.

“You got it, handsome. And for you?”

Elton glanced around her, uncertain. He had never been a big drinker—he didn’t like the distant, unfocused feeling. “What do you have on tap?”

Nathan tutted audibly at him before the woman could answer. “Do better than that, darling,” he insisted. “This is a rare occasion. Have a real drink.”

“Beer is a real drink,” Elton protested.

“Maybe at a hockey rink. This is Las Vegas. Have some liquor.”

The blond sighed as the bartender let out a chuckle and gave a shrug of agreement. “Fine. Crown and soda, please.”

“That’s better,” Nathan smiled, and the woman turned from them to fetch their drinks. She shortly placed a low, squat glass in front of Elton and set down a highball for Nathan.

“You boys let me know when you need some more, okay?”

“We will,” Nathan assured her. “Thank you.”

Elton lifted his drink to take a sip, but he stopped halfway there when Nathan swatted him on the arm.

“Ah ah ah. First a toast.” Nathan lifted his glass and held it toward the other man. “To unlikely friends.”

Elton didn’t move. “You’re not my friend.”

Nathan scoffed at him. “So cold, darling. You’re *my* friend.”

“No, I’m not. We’re partners, at best. For now.”

“Well, have it your way, then, darling. Sante.” He clinked his glass against Elton’s and took a long drink.

Elton set his glass back down without drinking and shifted on his stool to better face his companion. “So, this man Marquez told us about—”

“No, no, no,” Nathan interrupted. “We’re not discussing business tonight.”

“We need to have a plan for this, Nathan.”

“We have travel time to make a plan in. You need to relax, Elton. At least once in the time I’ve known you.”

Elton stared at him, frowning and uncertain as he scanned Nathan’s smirking face. “Fine,” he said at last. “But you make me a promise.”

“You have only to give it voice, darling.”

“No drugs.” Nathan quirked an eyebrow at him, but he went on before he could be interrupted again. “I don’t mind drinking, gambling, whatever you think relaxing looks like—but no drugs. Or I’ll drive you out into the desert and bury you.”

Nathan put a hand to his heart. “You have my solemn word, Elton.”

Elton nodded, then lifted his glass and took a long, deep swallow, letting the smooth liquor warm his throat. “Have it your way, then,” he murmured, echoing Nathan’s words but not turning to look at the other man’s sly smile.

“We also really should try to get you laid.”

The blond sputtered into his drink and touched the back of his hand to his lips to check for spills. “What’s that?”

Nathan glanced up to the ceiling as though he was thinking as he counted on his fingers. “You’ve been traveling around with me for weeks. Before that, you were in jail for six months. Before *that*, you were estranged from your wife and on ‘business trips’ for who knows how long. How long has it been, Elton?”

“I’m not—” Elton’s lips formed a thin line as he frowned, and he lowered his gaze to hide the faint heat he felt blossoming in his cheeks. “I’m not worried about that.”

“You should be!” Nathan laughed. “A man needs some release every now and then. You say you won’t have me, and unless you’ve been very sneaky in the hotel rooms—”

“Nope,” Elton cut him off. “No. Not having this conversation.”

He sighed. “You’re no fun at all, do you know that?” Nathan waved dismissively at him. “Fine. We don’t have to talk about it. I’ll just help you make sure it happens.”

“Do not do that.”

“Mhm. Yes, darling; whatever you say.”

“Nathan—”

“Drink up, Elton. I want to play cards.”

Nathan was happy to lead the way through the evening—after another round of drinks, he sat them down at a blackjack table, but Elton was seemingly incapable of winning a single hand, and they were asked to leave the table after Nathan not-so-subtly tried to pass Elton one of his own cards. They tried slot machines, Nathan lamenting the fact that modern casinos only printed receipts instead of filling giant plastic cups with nickels, and they drank more every time a waitress passed them by. Elton took Nathan by the back of his collar more than once when the other man attempted to follow beckoning women into the ladies’ room, and once even had to swat the other man’s hands away from him at the urinal, but his own head was growing too fuzzy to put up much protest when Nathan suggested they make the move to an actual nightclub.

They walked the strip together, Elton’s jacket abandoned back in the hotel room, his tie loosened, and both of them breathing in smoke from their cigarettes and made their way to a dark and crowded club inside a

different casino. The decorative silver accents glistened in the flashing lights, a glittering facade over the sweaty, drunken mass of bodies within, and the pounding music was deafening and heavy in Elton's chest. Balconies encircled the expansive dance floor, and twin bars lined two of the outer walls, so Nathan led them to the nearer one and made a place for them at the end. He ordered drinks for both of them, a shot of rum and whisky each, and despite Elton's protests that he'd had enough, when Nathan goaded him, the blond glared at him and swallowed the burning liquid down. Elton did put a hand on Nathan's chest to force him away when the other man tried to urge him out to dance. Nathan waved away his protests with a disdainful scoff and turned his attention to the writhing dancers spread across the room instead, drumming his fingers on the bar as he scanned the crowd.

Elton leaned against the bar and ran a weary hand over his face. He couldn't remember ever having drunk so much. His vision was blurred around the edges, and his tongue felt thick in his dry mouth. Nathan was in an exasperatingly good mood—Elton could tell by the look on his face that he was searching the club for someone likely to return to the hotel with him. He leaned back toward Elton to speak to him—about the city itself, or where they might find some food after a while, or that they would have time to take in a show, if only they could stay one more day—but the words were muffled by drink and lack of interest. How had Elton gotten here? In Las Vegas, drunk and sharing a hotel room with the man who had been the object of his obsession for so many years, the source of hope for the chance to prove himself. All of that was gone now. And Nathan would be so pleased with himself that he'd convinced Elton to come out at all.

He reached a hand out to grip Nathan firmly by the shoulder and pulled him close to talk beneath the thumping of the music.

"I lost my fucking wife for you," he growled into the other man's ear.

Nathan had the audacity to laugh. "Pardon?"

"My wife left me. I gave up promotions. Lost out on opportunities. All because I was so fucking caught up in finding you."

Nathan gave Elton's forearm a gentle pat, but the blond didn't release him. "I'm flattered, darling, really—"

"No," Elton snapped. "Shut up. I put everything on hold because I thought that tracking you down would actually do some good and make me

—and be worthwhile,” he corrected himself. “And now what? I fucking found you, and I’m nothing but a homeless, wanted murderer.”

“Elton,” Nathan sighed.

“You ruined my *life*.”

Nathan was trying and failing to bite back his smile, his hand still on his companion’s arm. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a sorrowful drunk.”

“Fuck you,” Elton spat, giving the other man a light shove as he let go of his shoulder.

“And such language as well,” Nathan laughed as he steadied himself, leaning an elbow on the bar to keep close enough to the blond to hear him.

“I thought you were going to be a monster,” Elton went on, ignoring Nathan’s jibe. “A sociopath serial killer. I thought I’d make a name for myself with you. But you’re not like the reports. You’re not some calculating villain. You’re a chainsmoking drunk with impulse control issues. And I gave everything up for you. For *this*?” He gestured toward Nathan as though the movement could encompass the breadth of his disappointment with him.

“Now you listen here, Mr. Willis.” Nathan rapped his knuckles on the bar and tilted his head at the other man. “There’s more than one way to make a name for yourself. You think those people we’ve sent back to Mr. Proctor are going to forget you? Or the council? Or your wife, for that matter? You aren’t invisible, Elton—you’re just on a different path. A good one. One that many men simply couldn’t stomach. You wouldn’t be happy any other way.” He edged a little closer to the blond, who still only stared at him with a sour, skeptical frown. “Picture yourself—home in time for supper, a couple of children shrieking for your attention, spending your days punishing minor crimes and sending people to be tortured for them—that’s the life you gave up. I don’t think you’re built for it,” he said simply. “I’ve never seen you so satisfied as when you came back from punishing that Magister’s murderous son, or when you had that greedy snake Maduro strung up as an example for all to see. *This* is the life you’re made for.”

Elton looked down at the bar rather than meet Nathan’s black eyes. He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair to move the stray wisps from his face. A quiet, empty scoff fell from his lips. “A life like yours?”

“In all ways but one,” Nathan purred, leaning in close to the blond and touching a single finger to his chin to draw his gaze upward. “Have you thought about what’s going to happen to me when you get old, Elton?”

Elton narrowed his eyes at him, his liquor-fogged brain too sluggish for nuance. “You’ll be old by then, too.”

“Shall I?”

The blond paused, and a spark of realization worked its way up the back of his neck, drying up a bit of the alcohol in his blood. Nathan would kill again. He would use the *arcela aïret* and start the whole cycle over again—only this time, Elton wouldn’t be there to rein him in. He finally locked eyes with the other man and shuddered at the slow, predatory smile he found on his face.

“Ah, you understand,” Nathan murmured. “Someday you’ll leave me all alone, to my own devices, to carry on as I please. Unless—” He paused, tapping his chin with one finger as though the thought had only just occurred to him. “Unless you don’t.”

Elton recoiled on instinct. “You’re not saying what I think you’re saying.”

“I could teach you,” he went on, moving forward for every inch Elton leaned back. “Think of how many more lives you could save, how much more good you could do, how many real villains could be punished—how many corrupt and cruel oppressors would cower and tremble at the sound of your name while they waited for the justice of your coming? If only you *had more time*.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Elton tried to sound forceful despite the churn in his stomach the notion caused. “I’m not using that spell.”

“I know you aren’t squeamish, darling. What’s the difference between what I’m suggesting and what we did this afternoon?”

“The difference is between killing someone who deserves it *because* they deserve it and killing someone for my own gain. It’s not the same.”

“Think about the greater good, then. Beyond yourself.”

“You don’t care about the greater good,” Elton sneered.

“But you do.” Nathan smiled at the hesitation that Elton was certain had crept into his eyes. “And I don’t think you realize how *easy*—”

“Enough.” Elton turned his face away and stepped back from the bar. “It’s not on the table.”

“Fine, fine,” Nathan sighed. He reached across to drain the last shot Elton had left untouched and tapped the glass back to the bar upside-down. “Then if you’re going to be depressing, I’m going to dance.”

Before Elton could comment, Nathan was gone, winding through the crowd into the colored lights and pounding bass. The blond just shook his head and moved back to put some distance between himself and the sickly scent of alcohol that saturated the bar itself. He let his head lean back against the wall and squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to still the swirling in his vision. He lost track of the time he spent there, letting the music drown out his thoughts, but he returned to reality at the touch of a pair of thin hands to his chest.

A young woman, laughing and unsteady on her high heels, had settled herself against him, and she paused to push long, dark hair out of her eyes before splaying manicured hands back over his shirt.

“Look at you,” she said with a smile, briefly catching her bottom lip in her teeth and glancing down to pick at one of the buttons on his vest. “So serious and handsome. You shouldn’t be over here all alone. Come and dance, honey!”

Elton lifted his hands, but he had no room to back away from the invasion. “No thanks,” he said, not quite willing to lay hands on her and push her away.

More laughter bubbled out of the woman, and she slid a hand up to hook one finger underneath the loosened knot of his tie. “He said you’d play hard to get,” she murmured, peeking up at him through thick eyelashes.

“He?”

She was suddenly pressed closer against him, and Nathan appeared behind her, his hands caressing her waist and his chin resting on her shoulder. He nuzzled the loose hair at the base of her neck, drawing a giggle from her, but his dark eyes were locked onto Elton with an intensity that made the blond shudder. “Come on, darling,” he purred, his low voice cutting straight to Elton’s ears even though the deafening music. “Play along. It would be so *easy*.”

Elton froze, his heart constricting in his chest as cold understanding washed over him. He knew exactly what Nathan meant. Easy for this girl to disappear. Easy to take her with them wherever they wanted and leave her a shrunken mass of dried bones on the side of a desert highway. Elton put his hands on the young woman’s shoulders and forced her gently away from him, slipping free of the narrow space between her body and the wall.

“No. Thank you,” he said again, unable to tear his eyes from Nathan’s stare as the other man released the woman back into the crowd. Elton did

his best to hold firm under that steady gaze, but his resolve faltered the longer Nathan watched him. The painful racing of his heart had sobered him a little—but he wasn't convinced that Nathan was drunk at all.

Nearby, a burly-looking man elbowed his way through the crowd and snatched the woman roughly by the wrist, tugging her close to shout in her face. He called her a whore for touching other men and began to drag her forcefully toward the door while she cringed and fought against his grip. Nathan turned to stand beside Elton and leaned against the blond's side, one arm resting casually on the slightly taller man's shoulder. He smirked up at his companion's troubled expression.

"Maybe he's a little more your style, hm? You see how he treats her?"

"Stop it," Elton murmured, not nearly as firmly as he meant to.

"Wouldn't she be better off without him? Wouldn't everyone?"

"Stop it!"

Nathan went quiet then, but he was smiling as he watched his companion's furrowed brow. There was no chance Elton's churning stomach wasn't showing on his face. If he had agreed, Nathan would have killed that woman without a second thought. He would have devoured her whole and spit out her bones—left her to dissolve into dust and blow away just for the sake of his own eternal vanity. That was who Elton was traveling with. That was Nathaniel Moore. Elton closed his hands into fists at his sides to control the faint shake that began in them. He'd almost forgotten. What troubled him even more was that—in some ways—Nathan was *right*. Wouldn't the world be better off without a man like that in it?

"I'm not talking about this anymore," he finally said. He turned his face away but couldn't bring himself to brush the other man's arm from his shoulder. "Let's have another drink."

9

Cora had been staring into her new scrying mirror for a while, running her fingertips over the smooth, dark surface, and picking through the bag of herbs and stones Thomas had left her with. He'd said the mirror could be treated, but hadn't told her how, and hadn't given her any guidance for actually using the thing at all. So, not super helpful, but she was grateful that he'd opened up to her, at least a little. It would make it much easier to stay in the dreary house if her roommate wasn't *quite* so surly.

Her phone's sudden vibration in the silence startled her so much she dropped the stone mirror, and she scrambled after it but failed to catch it before it rolled away across the floor. Puffing out a sigh, she sat back on her rear and picked up her phone. She smiled to see the response from Nathan.

Sorry to ignore you; bloody business here. Taking Elton drinking to celebrate. Wish me luck.

Cora chuckled as she tapped her reply. *What are you celebrating?*

Before she got an answer, the cellar door broke open at the far end of the room, and she looked up to see Thomas emerging from the hidden stairs. Right behind him, a man stepped out into the living room, followed by a woman holding the hand of a young girl. Sweat coated Thomas's brow, and the permanent circles under his eyes seemed a little darker, but the family

hauling their pair of suitcases from the cellar practically gave off waves of relief.

“Guess that answers that question,” she muttered to herself. She pushed up from the floor and moved across the room to smile at their new guests.

“Cora,” Thomas started, his voice sounding a little rough, “This is Charles, Lily, and Grace. They’ll be staying with us for a day or so until I can get them moved.” He nodded to the man he’d named as Charles and gestured toward her. “This is Cora. She’s—helping me,” he finished. The simple words somehow sounded awkward coming out of his mouth.

“Well, you guys picked a great little getaway home,” Cora teased. She bent down and put her hands on her knees to look the little girl in the eye. “This place has really nice rooms, and really spooky rooms. Which one would you rather have?”

The girl called Grace paused, mirroring the cheeky grin that Cora offered her, and then she half shouted, “A spooky one!”

“You got it, kid.”

Cora straightened and gestured to the family to follow her up the stairs. When she glanced back to make sure they were behind her, she stopped short at the sight of the woman with her arms tightly around Thomas’s neck. He wasn’t returning her embrace, exactly, but he did have enough compassion to touch one hand gently to her arm. As she pulled back, she offered him a teary smile and wiped the wet streaks from her face. Her husband shook Thomas’s hand with both of his own so fervently that Cora thought he might pull her housemate off his feet, but Thomas only nodded and quietly urged them upstairs to rest.

Cora opened the upstairs bedroom that had the creepy grim-faced portraits in it, which Grace trotted up to peer at right away and the parents didn’t seem to mind. “I’ll put on the spare set of sheets for you guys,” she offered as they set down their suitcases, “and see if I can scrounge up something to eat. You all look like you’ve had a day.”

“You could say that,” the woman chuckled. “Thank you.”

“I gotta say, though—I didn’t think I’d ever see anyone hugging Thomas. He gives me a feeling like I’d get bitten if I tried it.”

Charles gave a quiet laugh. “I know what you mean. But he’s nicer than he acts.” The man turned to lay a gentle hand on his daughter’s hair. “He’s saved our lives twice now. You know what they do to kids like ours.”

“Yeah,” Cora agreed softly. She brightened enough to offer them a smile and another promise of fresh sheets on her way out, but a small frown worked its way back onto her face for every step she took down the stairs. When she and Thomas had been in the Magistrate jail, he’d mentioned it wasn’t his first time being put under the cuimne, and that it probably wouldn’t be the last. How many times had he been caught and punished—tortured—for the same crime? And here he was again, still doing it, still risking his freedom and his sanity, just because it was the right thing to do. Maybe she’d been judging him too harshly. Who cared if he had a caustic personality? He’d done more for this single family than anyone could reasonably expect from him, and he’d done the same thing for a dozen or more others, too. She guessed she could forgive him being a little rude.

Thomas apparently had to wait for the animals to be delivered before he could send the Walker family away—and still refused to tell Cora what he needed them for, which made her increasingly more suspicious. But she passed the rest of the afternoon chatting with Lily and Charles, assuring them that Nathan, like Thomas, was much kinder than he pretended. Grace eagerly agreed with her, so excited to show off the charm Nathan had made her that a gust of magic blew the contents of the kitchen counter onto the floor with a clatter. The girl grinned through her embarrassed grimace, giggling as Cora related the story of breaking a car’s windows with a sneeze before Nathan found her and took her in.

When Thomas eventually showed himself around sunset, he was carrying his small leather satchel, and he stood in the kitchen doorway and tilted his head toward Cora.

“It’s time, if you’re ready. For the cleansing.”

“Oh—sure.” She smiled at Grace on her way out and followed Thomas to the front door. “Do I need to bring anything, or...?”

“I have what we need.”

She followed him into the yard and beyond into the woods, taking quick steps to keep up with him. “So what exactly is this ‘cleansing’ I need to do?”

“We need running water. There’s a brook nearby that will do. You don’t need to do anything, really. I’ll perform the ritual.”

“It doesn’t involve those creepy knives you bought this morning, right? You need to warn me before there’s any bloodletting, please.”

“No bloodletting,” he promised. “Not today.”

Thomas walked the uneven ground like he’d taken the path a hundred times—even in the dimming light of dusk, his steps were sure and steady, while Cora picked her way over roots and brambles and plucked sticky branches from her shirt as they tried to slow her progress. They made their way down a sloping hill to a narrow road cutting a path through the trees and passed a sign marking the trail as “Independence Greenway.”

When they’d been walking for close to ten minutes, Cora spoke up. “How far are we going?”

“Far enough.”

“Helpful. Do you get, like, extra points from your demon friend whenever you’re cryptic or something?”

Thomas snorted. “We need to make sure we aren’t disturbed. It isn’t far now.”

“Please promise me one more time that you’re not taking me out into the woods to murder me. I’ve seen this movie. I don’t want to end up in pieces in your creepy outside fridge.”

“You think I’d need to take you all the way out here to murder you?”

“Not super reassuring, Thomas.”

He stopped walking just short of the treeline and turned to face her. “Cora, jokes aside—if you’re going to do this, you need to trust me. Unreservedly. If you proceed with me, and you enter into that cellar, you need to have no reservations. I can do what’s necessary to protect you, but if the demon senses uncertainty, you could be in danger in its presence. Do you understand?”

Cora watched his face in the growing dark, a frown on his lips and a crease in his brow, and for the first time saw something in his scowling that she hadn’t before—worry. He really was concerned for her. The thought made her smile despite his grim expression. He *was* nicer than he acted.

“I understand,” she said. “I’ve never worked with any kind of spirits before, but you know what you’re doing. So let’s do it. I trust you.”

Thomas hesitated a moment, searching her face, but then he nodded. “This way,” he murmured, and he stepped over the short railing and into the woods. Cora stayed close so she didn’t lose him in the darkness, but she resisted the urge to reach out and take hold of the back of his cardigan. The cold air brought up goosebumps on her skin even under her light sweater, and the wind that hummed through the trees wasn’t helping, but the

moonlight pouring down on them in rays left everything in a soft silver glow that made it bearable. She rubbed her arms to warm them until they reached the promised brook, which was just broad and deep enough to splash pleasantly against the rocks that formed its edges. Thomas stopped at the edge of the water and set his satchel down on a broken stump.

“You’ll need to take off your clothes,” he said, and she stared at him.

“How *much* of my clothes?”

“All of them. You need to stand in the brook.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s freezing!”

“It’s April,” he sighed. “You’ll survive.”

“Yeah, well I’m from Arizona; we don’t do nighttime dips in rivers.”

“It’s your choice, Cora.”

She hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at the flowing creek. She didn’t really want to voice her deeper concern—that getting naked in front of Thomas was going to be awkward. It had to be awkward, right? But the way Thomas waited patiently, watching her without judgment or pressure, made the ball of tension in her stomach relax. It was just a body, wasn’t it? Thomas wasn’t there to leer at her. If he wasn’t going to be childish or weird about it, then she owed it to him not to be childish or weird herself. So she nodded, and in one determined movement, stripped off her sweater and shirt. She still swore against the chill in the air, but she passed her clothing into Thomas’s waiting hands and kicked off her boots, only pausing a moment more before removing her bra and panties. Thomas politely wrapped them in her sweater without touching them, his eyes never quite lifting to pass over her, and placed the bundle next to his satchel. He took a wide brass bowl from the bag and tucked a strange-looking, bulbed utensil into his sweater pocket.

“Get into the water, please,” he said, “and recite this.” He passed her a slip of paper from his pocket that had “Psalm XIV” written on the top in the small, careful handwriting she recognized from the grimoire in his bedroom.

Cora stepped reluctantly into the cold brook, hissing as the current washed over her lower legs and splashed her knees, and read the verse aloud, which somehow felt more awkward than being naked in the woods. She wasn’t religious; did this stuff even count if you weren’t a believer?

Thomas crouched at the edge of the creek and filled his deep bowl while she read, and as he stood, he made the sign of the cross over the surface of

the water and murmured softly to himself, "I exorcise thee, O Creature of Water, by Him Who hath created thee and gathered thee together into one place so that the dry land appeared, that thou uncover all the deceits of the Enemy, and that thou cast out from thee all the impurities and uncleannesses of the Spirits of the World of Phantasm, so they may harm not, through the virtue of God Almighty Who liveth and reigneth unto the Ages of Ages." As he spoke his "Amen," the water bubbled gently and flashed a soft blue before returning to the clear, cold water of the brook. He stepped forward into the water and stood scant inches from her, holding his bowl in both hands.

He kept his eyes on hers, which she appreciated, as she was pretty sure her nipples were capable of any extra glass-cutting he might need just now, and her prickled skin trembled. He was so close to her that she could feel the warmth of his body, and she felt much more exposed looking into his dark blue eyes than she would have if he'd been staring at her bare chest. She swallowed down the feeling and clutched the paper in her fist as if it could help to ground her.

"Are you ready?" Thomas asked softly, and she nodded. He raised his arms to hold the bowl above her head, and she lowered her eyes in preparation, attempting to focus on anything but the coming cold. Thomas's exposed skin at his collar showed signs of chill similar to hers, which was satisfying, but her gaze settled on a dark scar that cut across his neck just below his Adam's apple. Her brow furrowed in curiosity momentarily, but all thoughts quickly left her mind as Thomas began to pour the water over the crown of her head. She squeezed her eyes shut and listened to the sound of his steady, calm voice to distract herself from the icy liquid dripping onto her shoulders and streaming down her body.

"Be ye regenerate, cleansed, and purified, in the Name of the Ineffable, Great, and Eternal God, from all your iniquities, and may the virtue of the Most High descend upon you and abide with you always, so that ye may have the power and strength to accomplish the desires of your heart. Amen," he finished as the final rush of cold fell from his bowl and took a step back from her.

Cora squinted through the water dripping from her hair at Thomas retreating back to his storage stump, and she let out a grateful sigh as he tugged a long white robe from his bag and beckoned her out of the water. He wrapped it around her shoulders, fastening it with a simple silver pin,

and bent to pick up his bowl again. He dipped the brass utensil into the last of the water, and Cora saw that the strange bulb at the end had holes in it, which explained themselves as he used it to sprinkle a few more drops of the blessed water over her forehead and shoulders.

“All done,” he assured her gently, and he handed over her boots. While she tied them, he laid his cardigan over her shoulders to supplement the thin robe, and she shivered at the sudden warmth he’d passed to her.

She stood and wrapped the soft knit closer around her, smiling faintly as he carefully packed her clothes into his bag. “Thanks.”

“You’ll need to say a prayer in the morning and evening every day as long as you plan to enter the cellar,” he answered, already putting the strap of his satchel over his shoulder. “I’ll write it down for you. And nothing to eat but bread and water in the evenings for three days.”

“At least I won’t have to cook in that fireplace, I guess.”

A small smile touched his lips before he turned away. “Come on. Let’s get you warm and dry.”

Back at the house, hair towel-dried and clothes changed, Cora cleaned up the remnants of their houseguests’ dinner while Thomas vanished into the cellar again. She didn’t even ask to come in this time—he’d told her that he would let her help, and she believed him. She had to trust him.

She filled her arms with the few food items that needed to go back into the root cellar and nudged the back door open with her foot, leaving it open enough for the light from the kitchen to show her the way to the stone steps at the end of the yard. Halfway there, a soft sound drew her attention, and as she glanced toward the woods beyond her destination, she froze.

Korshunov stood still beside one of the trees, his eyes locked on her. Panic flooded her at once, and her arms lost the strength to hold the vegetables she was carrying. The Chaser hadn’t moved; only the end of his coat shifted in the breeze. Before she could even form a coherent thought, she was shouting Thomas’s name and scrambling back toward the open door.

Thomas was already in the doorway with his wand in his hand by the time she reached the house, but when she grabbed him by the front of his shirt and turned to point toward the woods, Korshunov was gone. She scanned the treeline frantically and saw no sign of him.

“What happened?” Thomas asked, following her gaze into the darkness with confusion on his face.

“It’s Korshunov. That Chaser. He’s here. I saw him, right over there.”

Thomas moved her behind him with a gentle hand, and she allowed it, watching over her shoulder in case she needed to tell the Walkers to stay inside. Thomas took a step into the yard, lifting the carved length of wood in front of him, and murmured, “Invieni eum sis.”

A pulse of magic expanded from him, making Cora queasy as the ring seemed to cut through her middle, and the pair waited, silently listening, for a few long seconds. Thomas tilted his head, but when nothing happened, he turned back to Cora.

“There’s no one here.”

“He was there,” she insisted. “I saw him.”

“It’s dark; you probably just saw an animal in the woods.”

Her nostrils flared in irritation as she gestured toward the trees. “Yeah, Thomas, I saw a six-foot-tall animal in a tie glaring at me. That’s what I saw.”

“Cora,” Thomas countered quietly, “there’s nothing here.”

“No. I know what I saw. I’m not some frightened child jumping at shadows. This person is after Nathan and Elton, and he’s not afraid to come at me to get them. Just because your seeking spell sucks, it doesn’t mean he’s not out there!”

Thomas visibly bristled at the insinuation, but he bit back his words and took a quick breath before answering. “Even if there was someone out here —”

“There’s no if!” Cora shouted. “This has to go both ways, Thomas! You asked me to trust you—how can I do that if you don’t trust me, too?”

He shut his eyes for a moment, seeming to force himself to soften, and nodded. “You’re right,” he admitted in a gentler voice. “But he’s not here now. Either way, the safest place is in the house. No one is getting inside here who I don’t let in.” He gestured toward the door, and she backed into the kitchen with frustration written on her face to let him shut and lock the door behind them.

“We can’t just stay in here forever,” she protested.

“We don’t have to. But let’s not take risks until Charles and Lily are gone. You’re safe here, Cora,” he promised. “Get some rest tonight.”

She huffed and dropped her hands noisily to her sides, not quite agreeing but not willing to argue further. Yet. When he left her again, she went around the house checking the doors and windows, half expecting to see Korshunov's face staring at her from the darkness every time she peeked through the dusty curtains. She slipped into her bedroom quietly to avoid the temptation to express her worries to the visiting family and picked her phone up from the nightstand. Nathan needed to know that Korshunov was in Salem.

The woman from the shop in town came knocking on Thomas's door early the next morning, and when Cora answered, she was presented with two cages—a plastic cat carrier and a wire cage just large enough for the magpie that sat morosely on its perch. Cora looked over her shoulder as Thomas approached, holding onto the handle of the cat carrier even when he tried to take it from her. He tugged gently once, then twice, but she wouldn't let go.

"What are you doing with the cat, Thomas?"

"Cora—"

"What are you doing with the *cat*, Thomas?" she repeated, her other hand creeping around to keep a firmer grip on the carrier.

"Can you just bring it inside?" He reached across her to give the woman on the porch a quick thank you, then shut the door on her and carried the birdcage toward the sealed cellar door.

"Thomas!" Cora snapped, and he finally paused, his shoulders rising and falling in a quick sigh.

"You wouldn't be asking so much if you didn't already know."

Cora held the carrier tighter to her chest and peeked inside at the wide golden eyes staring back at her through the slats. The cat bared its teeth in a soft, high-pitched meow, a momentary break in the solid darkness of its body. "You can't just..." She stopped short and glanced upstairs, wary of the little girl in their midst overhearing their conversation. She strode across the room, took Thomas by the front of his cardigan, and dragged him into the study, shutting the door with difficulty as she was still unwilling to relinquish her hold on the carrier.

"You're just going to kill them?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"It can't be avoided, Cora. I'll be humane, but I need their blood. I lost my old materials back in Toronto; I have to have new ones. I won't be able

to send Lily and Charles away without them.” He tilted his head at her. “Didn’t you crush a spider in your bare hands when we were in those cells?”

“That’s a spider!” she countered. “It’s not a cat! Cats are...bigger, and they have...vertebrae, and purr boxes, and they’re...”

“They’re cute,” he finished for her, and she huffed in irritation and glared up at him.

“Yes, okay? They’re cute. Herman is cute.”

“Herman?”

“That’s his name.” Cora lifted the carrier to peek inside again, holding it up so that Thomas could see the cat through the grate. “Isn’t he sweet? You couldn’t kill Herman, could you?”

“You named it in the last ten seconds?”

“He looks like a Herman,” she said. “There isn’t any other way, really?”

“Demons aren’t known for being flexible,” Thomas said with a sigh. He hesitated, glancing between the cage in his hand and the face of the cat staring at him, and he rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “I...suppose, the cat...I could just take what I need. It would probably survive. The magpie, though—they don’t have very much blood to begin with.”

Cora frowned at the little bird, its soft white belly puffing up with each breath as it twisted its head to peer at her. “I guess...if there’s no other way.”

“Also,” Thomas went on, “I don’t want a cat.”

“I’ll take care of it! You won’t even know he’s here; I promise.”

Thomas opened his mouth to protest further, but he stopped short of saying it aloud. He gave a last, soft sigh and held his hand out for the carrier. “Give it here. I won’t kill it.”

“You promise?”

He checked his watch with an impatient glance. “Cora, if I miss the hour, I’ll have to wait until this afternoon.”

“Promise me. Please.”

He let his hand drop back to his side. “I promise to try.”

Cora hesitated, clinging to the carrier a moment longer, then passed it off to him with an uneasy frown.

“I put them to sleep first,” he said, nodding toward the door to ask her to open it. “They never feel a thing.”

“Okay,” she agreed, finally letting him out of the room and following him to the door of the cellar.

Once he'd disappeared inside, she sat on the sofa in view of the hidden passage and waited, hands on her knees. She smiled cheerfully at Grace as the girl passed by in search of a snack, but she was glad when she retreated back upstairs with her family. The Walkers had spent a lot of time resting since they'd arrived, which Cora definitely understood. After the experience they described, Cora would have wanted to nap for a couple days, too. There had only been a few crashes from their room, even, so whatever Nathan had done for their daughter had clearly helped at least a little bit. She smiled at the thought of him entertaining a small child. He was bad enough as a teacher; she couldn't imagine having him as a father.

After an hour or so had passed, the basement door creaked open, and Thomas lifted it with one hand to climb up the stairs. He held the cat carrier in his other hand, and when Cora perked up and lifted her eyebrows at him, he approached and carefully set the cage down on the couch beside her.

"It's sleeping," he assured her.

Cora bent to open the metal door and peek inside. The cat lay still, slowly breathing, and seemed no worse for wear—except that now it had a soft white bandage wrapped snugly around its neck. She reached in to give the animal's soft fur a slow, gentle stroke, and smiled up at Thomas.

"Thank you," she said, and he paused a moment before giving her an uncomfortable nod and excusing himself back to the solitude of the cellar.

10

Elton woke up feeling heavy and mildly sticky. His head seemed to weigh more than the rest of his body as he opened his eyes, and he squinted into the light from the hotel window while he struggled to lift his face from the pillow. He managed to get his hands underneath him and pushed up from his stomach, licking dry lips and squeezing his eyes shut to still the swirling. He was only barely on the bed and completely uncovered by the blanket, the cold flow from the air conditioner causing a shiver in him that forced his half-asleep brain to take note of the fact that he was naked. He paused, supporting himself on his hands, and glanced across the width of the king-size bed, counting one, two, and three sleeping women, with Nathan similarly naked and exposed on the opposite edge.

The blond jolted from the bed so quickly that he almost stumbled, and he scrambled to snatch his discarded pants from the floor. His head swam, and he had to lean his shoulder against the closest wall to stay upright long enough to get his pants all the way up.

“Nathan,” he hissed, reaching out to slap the sleeping man’s dangling foot. “Get up,” he snapped when Nathan only grunted at him.

The women began to stir one by one, rubbing their eyes and stretching, and Elton gathered up any feminine-looking clothing he found scattered on

the floor and tossed it onto the bed.

“Time to go, please,” he said as politely as he could manage before smacking his drowsy companion’s leg again. “Nathan, what the fuck is this?” he demanded, keeping his back turned as their guests began to dress themselves. Their soft laughter bubbled behind him.

“You don’t even want us to stay for breakfast?” one of the women said, and Elton shook his head without turning around, though even that movement forced him to use the bathroom doorway for stability.

“Please leave,” he insisted. He jumped at the light scratch of fingernails across his bare back, but when he glanced behind him, he saw three fully-dressed if disheveled women, so he ushered them out of the suite with all the dignity he could muster—which he had to admit wasn’t much. “Sorry; have a good day,” he offered as he shut the door behind them, then he leaned his forehead against the closed door and shut his eyes as he cringed. Have a good day?

He pushed away from the door with one hand and moved toward the bathroom on unsteady feet, his stomach lurching. He managed enough clarity to be angry when he found Nathan still sprawled on the bed, sat up on his elbows with a devious smirk on his lips.

“Why are you still in bed?” Elton said as he stepped past the bed and into the open bathroom.

“Why aren’t you still in bed?” Nathan countered. “I’ll get cold.”

“Ugh,” Elton groaned, turning the faucet on full blast to splash cool water on his face. “What the fuck even happened?”

“You don’t remember? I’m wounded.”

Elton leaned his elbows on the sink and tried to scrub away his headache. He had vague recollections of being at the bar, and then they were on the street, Nathan pulling him by the arm while he was trying to finish a cigarette, and then—had they been on the Ferris wheel? He had no idea where the women had come from. The whole night was a blur of empty glasses, bright lights, and sweat. “Why did you let me drink so much?”

A short burst of laughter escaped the other man. “*Me let you?*”

“Just...shut up.” Elton turned off the faucet and started the water in the shower instead. “We need to get going.” He shut the bathroom door and locked it as if it would lock Nathan out of his life. He stood under the hot water for so long that he almost fell asleep against the wall, startling

himself awake and grabbing onto the shower curtain to keep his balance. Shaving his face in the steamy room took longer than normal, as he more than once had to stop and steady himself against the sink when his stomach threatened to empty itself.

When Elton finally emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his waist, feeling only minutely more human, he found that Nathan had packed up both of their suitcases and left them waiting on the bed for Elton's toiletries. He gave the blond a light pat on the shoulder as he brushed by him into the bathroom.

"Took your time, didn't you? I've found us a flight to Los Angeles. It leaves in a couple of hours, so we'll need to get a move on. I'll be quick—there's coffee on the table."

Elton stared after him even as the bathroom door clicked shut. Nathan was being...responsible? Maybe he was still sleeping. But the shower was running, and Nathan's low, tuneless humming was drifting through the crack at the bottom of the door. Elton stepped over to the coffee table and bent to peer into the paper cup as though he thought it might be full of poison. He watched the entrance to the bathroom with suspicion for a moment longer, but he was too tired to muster up much ire—except, perhaps, for the fact that Elton felt like he was dying, and Nathan seemed as if he'd never even heard of the concept of a hangover.

Nathan hurried him out the door within a few minutes, forcing the coffee into one of his hands and his suitcase into the other. In the back of the taxi, Elton sat slouched in the seat, sunglasses keeping the bulk of the blinding sun out of his eyes as he leaned back against the headrest but doing little to help his lingering, throbbing headache. He hadn't even bothered to get properly dressed—he'd tucked in his shirt and buttoned his vest, but the heat had caused him to roll up his sleeves and forego his jacket, and the challenge of tying a tie was one he did not remotely feel up to facing, so he'd left the top couple buttons of his shirt undone. He held the coffee cup balanced on one knee but had yet to touch it. His stomach was still churning. Nathan was chatting away beside him, but Elton kept his eyes closed.

"Shhh." Elton shook his head just enough to get his point across. "Just. Shh."

"Did you just shush me?"

Elton turned his head to stare at the man beside him, a weary scowl on his face.

“Don’t glare at me so, darling. After the night we had together?”

“Shut up. I don’t remember anything, and I like it that way.”

“Have it your way,” Nathan chuckled. “I suppose those memories are all mine, then.”

Elton grunted in distaste and turned his attention to the passing scenery outside the window.

When the driver let them out at the airport, Elton stood outside the glass doors and finally drained the lukewarm coffee in a few long gulps. He tossed the empty cup into the trash and gave his head a sharp shake to try to wake himself up.

“How do you live like this?” he grumbled at Nathan, who waited by the sliding doors with a look of great amusement on his face.

“Lots of practice. Come along now, darling; we’ve a flight to catch.”

Elton followed behind, dragging his suitcase as Nathan led the way to the check-in counter and wishing his hatred could actually hurt the other man.

Once they were on their way to security, Nathan passed a glamour spell over the both of them that saw them through the other side of the gate successfully. At almost every terminal they walked by, a few men or women waited in small groups that stood out. They were dressed in normal clothing and varied in age, but they watched the crowds too carefully for their casual conversations to be authentic. Nathan nudged Elton’s arm with his elbow and directed his attention to one cluster as they passed it.

“Chasers,” he murmured, and Elton nodded his agreement. “I expect we’ll see a lot more of them about now that it’s the first of the month. They’re going to get bolder. Planes are going to cease to be a good option before too much longer.”

Elton tugged off his sunglasses with a sigh and slid them into his shirt pocket. “Then we’ll figure something else out.”

He took a seat at their terminal and searched his bag for the paper that Marquez had given them, hoping that having something to focus on would help clear his head and distract him from his nausea. Garrison Winnick, the Magister of Los Angeles, was sixty-five, white, and looked like a banker. He *was* a banker, Elton realized as he read further down the page. That

sounded like the right kind of money to buy yourself an important place in the Magistrate.

The paper read like a resume—it had the man’s name on it, a business address, and a laundry list of educational and professional credentials, as well as a few handwritten notes that Marquez must have taken, but very little in the way of information that would be useful to them. Elton scanned the notes and brought the paper closer to read the compact handwriting. Marquez had written in Spanish, which Elton didn’t read, but one word stood out to him nonetheless. He leaned an elbow on the armrest he shared with Nathan and held the paper out to him, pointing out the suspect line.

“Does this say what I think it does?”

Nathan tilted his head to see. “Supremacista. Indeed it does,” he murmured. “That’s a troubling word, isn’t it?”

Elton hummed a soft agreement. “Doesn’t bode well in the current climate.”

“Well, then let’s see if we can put a stop to it sooner rather than later, hm?”

A sharp, hissing whisper slipped past Elton’s ear, and he looked up to find the source. A pair of young women stood near the corner of the seating area, clutching at each other’s hands as they whispered and darting their eyes around at the crowd. Elton watched them curiously, and when one of the women glanced in his direction and locked eyes with him, panic flashed across her face. She gripped her companion’s wrist and tugged her away and around the corner out of sight. Elton’s eyes narrowed briefly, and he shifted to touch the smooth willow token in his pocket, his thumb warming the well-worn surface. A thrum of magic pulsed under his skin at his softly whispered incantation, its pull familiar to him. This wasn’t Nathan’s glamour he was sensing—he knew the heated prickling of *dorche* almost better than he knew his own magic.

Nathan leaned over to him, his head almost touching the blond’s shoulder. “Something catch your eye, darling?”

“Those girls that were just here,” Elton answered quietly. “I think they’re witches. They took off when they saw me.”

“That’s that atrocious case of cop-face working against you. Some things even I can’t cover up with a glamour,” Nathan chuckled.

Elton ignored the jab. “I’m going to talk to them.”

“Always on duty, aren’t you, Mr. Willis?”

Elton stood and nudged his suitcase further underneath the seat with one foot. “If they’re trying to avoid Chasers, they need to know that the stakes are higher than they think.”

Nathan didn’t argue, for once. “Do your good deed for the day, darling.” He waved his companion away and settled back into his seat with one leg crossed over the other.

Elton walked the corridor with a distracted, curious look and turned the near corner where the women had disappeared. He spotted them lurking to the side of a vending machine and approached them with a careful step, taking his wallet from his pocket on the pretense of searching it for singles for the machine. The pair went dead silent beside him, purposely avoiding looking at him, their hands held tightly together.

“You’re standing out,” Elton murmured, and both women noticeably tensed. “If you’re trying not to be noticed by the Chasers, you’re doing a bad job.”

The taller woman turned slowly, just enough to peek over her shoulder at him. Her eyes darted down to Elton’s hand, searching it for the signature silver ring, and then back up to his face with confusion.

“You need to be more careful,” Elton went on without taking his attention from the vending machine for more than a moment, as if he was having trouble deciding whether to have a salty or sugary snack.

“Who are you?” one of the women whispered.

“Just someone who knows that the Chasers are going to stop asking questions when they arrest people, and the Magisters are going to stop having trials. If you’ve done anything they’re going to care about, I’d recommend lying lower than usual.”

“We’re not *real* criminals!” the other woman protested. “We just sell sothcad potions. It’s Las Vegas,” she added, as though that justified anything.

Elton sighed silently through his nose. He’d heard the argument a thousand times in his career at the Magistrate. Luck potions like the sothcad, love potions, truth serums, any number of poisons—they were all illegal to produce, purchase, sell, consume, or administer, but hundreds of piddling black market merchants insisted that *they* weren’t doing anything wrong. They were only selling potions, which were nothing but bottles of ingredients, really, and whatever their customers did with them *afterwards* was no fault of their own. It was a petty, grasping attempt at a loophole that

had always gotten under Elton's skin. Even so, he wouldn't have called it a crime worth being hanged for.

"They won't see it that way," he said simply. "Just be careful. Things are about to get much worse with the Magistrate."

"How do you know? What have you heard? Why are there so many here all of a sudden? It's never been like this." The woman perked up as a boarding call was announced, and her partner tugged on her hand.

"I heard enough. We're going to draw attention if we keep talking. Just get on your plane, and don't travel for a while. Tell any of your business associates that the Chasers are going to be everywhere soon." Elton peered into his wallet one last time, then shook his head and left the vending machine empty-handed.

He took his place beside Nathan, who seemed to have acquired a crossword book in his absence, and watched the women from the corner of his eye as they stood together in the boarding line at the next gate. They had finally released each other and now stood more casually while they waited. Elton kept them in his periphery until they disappeared beyond the gate doors, and he allowed a faint smile to touch his lips. That was two people, at least, that the Magistrate wouldn't be "processing" today.

"Feel better?" Nathan asked without looking up from his puzzle, but Elton ignored him.

He checked the address on the Magister's resume against the map on his phone and studied the area until it was time to board their flight, then followed Nathan to the gate with his suitcase rolling behind him. As he handed the attendant his boarding pass, a brief, smothered shout caught his attention, and he and Nathan both turned to look. Down the corridor, behind a thin, iridescent sheen of blue that the mundanes around them walked blindly through, a pair of Chasers had a young man on the ground, arms twisted behind his back by their binding spell. The boy was shouting, but the rest of the travelers in the concourse passed him by without notice, even when one of the men kicked him in the side of the head to silence his voice.

Nathan's hand fastened firmly onto Elton's bicep, keeping him in place before the blond even realized he was moving forward.

"Peace, darling," Nathan murmured. "Remember that we're aiming for the heart of the hydra and not its innumerable heads."

Elton didn't quite relax in the other man's grip, but he did stay put. He watched the boy, lifted in rough arms and carried down the corridor, until

Nathan nudged him into the gate. They couldn't waste any more time.

The address on Winnick's resume led them to a towering building of white concrete and pale glass, shaped into a concave arch that formed a courtyard of palm trees edging to the curb of the street. The narrower building beside it seemed like it had been taken from the center of its mate, all rounded glass and sleek walkways leading to a delicately-formed dome at the apex. Nathan and Elton had found a hotel to drop their things—Nathan had “settled” for the Four Seasons—and now the pair of them stood on the sidewalk across the street from the shining bank office.

“This is where our dastardly villain is?” Nathan asked, leaning back to see the top of the building and shielding his eyes with one hand. “At the bank?”

Elton breathed out the line of smoke he'd been holding in his lungs. “What, you're surprised the villain is a white guy in a suit?”

“Said the white guy in a suit,” Nathan snorted.

“I'm sure plenty of people think of us as villains.”

“Fair enough.” Nathan dropped his hand and gestured toward the bank. “Shall we see if the boss is in, then?”

“No plan, just walk in and ask to talk to the CEO?”

“I would have been happy to make a plan with you, darling, if you hadn't spent the entire flight snoring.”

Elton sighed. “Well, we can at least check it out. See how easy he is to get to.”

“That's the spirit. You see? Another handful of days with me and you'll be comfortable with completely winging every murder.”

“Great.” Elton took another final drag from his cigarette and put it out on the nearest trash can on his way to the crosswalk, Nathan trailing behind him like a lagging child all the way to the bank's broad walkway.

The slick floors clicked under the heels of Elton's dress shoes as he crossed the sprawling lobby, the sunlight shining in almost-solid beams angled sharply from the windows to the polished stone. Solid glass formed the span of an entire wall, showing the workings of dozens of workers in their exposed offices, and beneath, a long marble counter ran the length of the room, attended at intervals by attractive female tellers in matching dark blue blazers and low ponytails. They almost seemed to move in unison, poised and politely smiling at the customers who stood at their stations.

“Cheery,” Nathan muttered, and Elton grunted his soft agreement. At least it was busy enough that their entrance had gone unnoticed—though neither of them were as immaculately dressed as the majority of the clients and employees who bustled through the lobby to and from the elevators.

“We’re going to be recognized if we just walk up to the counter. You are, at the very least. I assume we’re already on camera.”

“If we know where we’re going, I can get us there without being seen,” Nathan offered. “If even you couldn’t seek me out, I have faith in my ability to fool simple machinery.”

“Fine.” Elton nodded toward the mirrored walls of elevators around the corner. “My guess is the top floor. We have a look. Quietly.”

“Unless we find him alone, in which case we finish up and call Señora Marquez to collect our grateful accolades.”

“In the unlikely event that the owner of this massive bank is isolated and unprotected somewhere in his own building, yes, we can do that. Let’s just get to the right floor first.”

“As you wish, darling. Let’s be off.” Nathan held out his hand to him, and Elton glanced down at it and back to Nathan’s face with one eyebrow ticked. Nathan wiggled his fingers at him expectantly.

“You’re serious?”

“Can’t do two people without skin contact. Don’t be shy.”

Elton tried to keep his sigh inside as he reached out to accept Nathan’s hand, frowning as the other man laced their fingers together.

“Hoona sattaande,” Nathan whispered, and Elton felt a wave of cold flow up his arm from where Nathan gripped his hand, washing over his entire body with a cool, prickling sensation. Nathan led the way across the lobby, striding by the watchful security guard outside the hallway without pause, and touched the button to call the elevator. They stood waiting, Elton struggling not to fidget in the other man’s easy hold, but he did give a firm, warning squeeze when Nathan began to idly swing their hands between them.

They took a place at the back of the elevator as it opened and filled with passengers, flattening against the wall to keep from touching the people with legitimate business in the building. When Nathan got a chance, he leaned around a woman in a pantsuit and touched the button for the top floor, but it only blinked once and shut off again. It needed a key. Nathan pulled Elton’s hand with him as he edged closer to the console and pressed

his palm to the metal, and with a soft, subtle click, the button for the 40th floor illuminated. The woman in front of them glanced briefly at it, but then stepped off at her own floor, leaving them alone in the smoothly rising elevator car.

“Let’s try to limit collateral damage,” Elton said quietly. “We don’t need to kill secretaries just to get to this guy.”

“I’ll do my best,” Nathan chuckled, “but you know how I do love collateral damage.”

The elevator gave a low, dignified ding as it came to a stop at their chosen floor, and the doors slid silently open. Nathan and Elton stepped out into the empty hallway and paused, but Nathan tugged the blond with him to the left as he made a decision. The corridor turned gently around the rounded outer wall of the building and ended in a pair of massive wooden doors. Nathan stopped just in front of them and placed a hand against the carved wood, leaning in close to put his ear to the crack. He glanced back toward Elton and gave a small nod, then finally released the blond’s hand.

With a single shove of casual impertinence, Nathan opened both doors wide, exposing an expansive office with tall windows and a broad, lacquered desk placed directly in the center. Expensive paintings lined the back wall, framing the pale stone statue of a stag’s head that made up the centerpiece. The man seated in the leather chair behind the desk didn’t look up at the intrusion. Elton recognized him immediately from the photo on Marquez’s paper—he was heavy-faced and slightly overweight, with neatly-cut hair that was more salt than pepper. Winnick finished his in-progress signature in a flourish and set his pen down with an unhurried hand, then looked up at the pair standing in his doorway and lifted his eyebrows curiously.

“Ah, you made it,” he said, making no move to rise from his seat. “Did you get lost? I saw you in the lobby some time ago.”

Elton and Nathan exchanged a brief glance, but it was Nathan who spoke.

“Not very concerned for your well-being, are you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Winnick folded his hands on the desk in front of him and didn’t take his eyes from Nathan’s face. “Do you think I’m a fucking idiot?”

Elton barely had time to register the dull thud that sent Nathan crumpling forward to the floor before a solid blow blackened his own

vision, and his knees hit the carpet shortly before his face.

11

Elton was roused by a rough jostling from behind, and when he opened his eyes, all the aches of his body came flooding back to his attention along with his consciousness. His legs and arms tingled from lack of blood flow, his head throbbed, and his back was soaked with sweat. It was dark, but the moon shone enough light to reflect off of the surface of the lake he sat beside, explaining the damp sand coating his hands and rear. Nothing but dark water and brown, brush-spotted hills surrounded him as far as he could see, only the faint hint of light across the wide lake giving any sign of civilization. He couldn't even move—his hands were bound tightly behind him with thin cord that kept his elbows flat against his sides, and as he turned his head, he found Nathan, similarly secured and tied back to back with him. It was his struggling that had woken Elton, but now he paused.

“Still with me, Elton?” he said, craning his neck to look back at the blond. “I wondered if you would wake up.”

“What the hell happened?”

“You got knocked out.”

“Oh, just me?” Elton pulled against his bonds to no effect. He could smell the angelica oil soaking the ropes, dampening their magic, and felt the

light emptiness of his pocket—they'd taken his paper talismans.

"This is why I always want to just blow the building up," Nathan grumbled.

"What good are you, Mr. Nathaniel fucking Moore? Aren't you supposed to be better than this?"

"Hey," Nathan countered, jerking Elton backward in his own attempt to pull free. "I didn't expect they'd use their *hands*. It's uncivilized."

"For fuck's sake."

"Steady on, darling. Give us a moment." Nathan shifted in the sand, twisting his hand as much as he could in the snug knots, and Elton felt the other man's fingers brushing his wrist. "Keep still. Don't want to nick you. Ti kras."

A soft rip sounded in the still night air, snapping one of the cords and letting a rush of blood flow back into Elton's hand, but the binding held fast when he tried to pull away. He settled again with a sigh when Nathan tutted a scolding at him. A small splash in the surface of the water drew their attention, and as they turned to look, a rolling dome of water swelled and burst at the center of the lake, revealing a grey, wrinkled snout. Nostrils as wide as Elton was tall flared and splattered lake water like rain as they snorted. A growing whirlpool roared as more scaled skin appeared above the surface, an endless neck and spines of delicate fins extending above the lake. One slick, webbed hand reached to find purchase on the ground not far from them, claws sinking into the pale sand, and then the beast shook its head, its scales rippling down its neck with the movement. Its whole body seemed swollen and bloated, and bits of algae clung to the gaps in its tarnished silver scales. It tilted one monstrous eye at them, and its slit pupil narrowed in recognition.

Both men stared up at the creature that towered over them, too stunned to move. Then, as the beast began to pull its long frame from the depths of the water, Elton whispered, "A little faster with that spell, maybe?"

Nathan hissed out a curse and hurried to cut every cord his fingers could reach, the bindings finally falling to the sand and Nathan scrambling to his feet with Elton half a step behind him. Two, four, then six legs emerged from the lake as the beast clawed its way out of the water, easily closing the distance to its prey even while the two men ran full tilt for the hills beyond the lake. The ground shook under their feet at every step the creature took, and they were both forced to skid to a stop when one clawed hand crashed

into the dirt ahead of them. Hot, rotten breath poured out of the beast's mouth above them, its long, vinelike whiskers trailing in the dust as it bent low to show them its rows of knives masquerading as teeth.

Nathan reached out to Elton and grabbed him firmly by the arm. "Achòxa," he said in a rush, and Elton felt himself pulled as if through a flood light, blinded by the flash that engulfed them both. He stumbled at his sudden stop, only staying on his feet with the help of Nathan's steadying hand on his shoulder. Elton blinked the spots from his eyes and looked down the tall hill toward where the now distant monster howled at them, the ringing vibration of the echo shaking Elton's bones.

"Only have a couple of those in me," Nathan said. Elton's eyes moved to his companion's bare wrist—their captors had taken his bracelet as well, which meant maintaining the invisibility spell long enough to be useful was unlikely. "So let's keep running, shall we?"

Elton didn't have to voice his agreement. He didn't know where they were going, but anywhere in the opposite direction of the monster from the lake seemed like a good enough idea at the moment. He ran with Nathan at his side, only turning his head at the steady pounding that pulsed behind them. The creature had begun to give chase, its long, serpentine body slithering across the ground on its unnecessary number of legs. When it reached the top of the nearest hill, it rose up on its rear four feet, and as it reached outward, thick, sinewy webbing stretched underneath its arms and caught the hot mountain air, pulling the entire monstrous body off of the ground with one solid beat downward.

"Wasn't expecting it to fly!" Nathan called with a laugh in his voice that made Elton want to strangle him. "We'll have to do better than running, I think!" He slowed to a stop with Elton alongside him and turned to face the approaching beast. "Don't suppose you have anything useful on you?"

"They took my papers," Elton answered, his eyes on the fast-approaching jaws. "And I'm not excited to lay hands on that thing."

"Well, then just try not to get eaten."

The creature landed almost on top of them, and Nathan stumbled from the impact but reached out his hands toward the maw that opened scant feet from his head. "Konpòte yo," he growled, his hands twisting and closing into fists as though taking hold of unseen ropes, and as he planted his feet and jerked his arms downwards, the monster's head crashed to the ground in a cloud of dirt and a vicious snarl. It fought the hold, dragging Nathan

forward on his feet, its winged arms thrashing wildly and throwing up dust devils.

Elton was useless—the only thing left to him was the small wood token in his pocket, too insignificant to be confiscated. It was only good for detecting magic, and he was fairly certain that he didn't need a seeking spell to find the monster in front of him.

“Keep running, at least!” Nathan shouted at him, startling him into movement. There was no killing an animal like this, especially not without their supplies. They just needed to get away—slow it down, get it off their trail—Elton just needed to find something to help them do that.

Elton ran, an angry roar quaking the air around him, and before he got very far, Nathan struck the ground beside him, tumbling backward in an ungainly somersault as he was hurled loose from his spell by the creature's flinging head. Elton grabbed him by the arm to get him to his feet and keep him moving despite the deep cuts the rocks had made in Nathan's face and shoulders, but another heavy pulse of wings closed the gap their efforts had put between them and the monster. They were far from the lake now, but the beast showed no sign of giving up its prey. It snapped at them, only diverting at the last moment from Nathan's quick shout of “sevre” opening a fat cut in its snout.

In the moments they had while the animal shook its head and clawed angrily at its injury, Nathan and Elton took the chance to skid down a hill off to the creature's flank, where a small outcropping of trees offered at least the opportunity to get out of sight. Before they could reach it, a massive, clawed hand slammed into Elton's back, knocking him face first into the dirt and pinning his legs under damp, putrid scales. His bad shoulder cried out in complaint, but he couldn't move enough to get his hands under him. Ahead of him, Nathan was still running, and as he slowed to turn and glance behind him, a soft, shimmering ripple of blue rolled outward from him and into the surrounding air.

A barrier.

Nathan reached out a testing hand to touch it, sending another wave of light from the space his hand passed through. A barrier for the beast, not for humans. Nathan was beyond it now, safe, escaped—and Elton could feel the monster's breath above him as it bent lower to close its jaws.

Elton didn't dare look up as thick whiskers brushed the ground to either side of him. As the first fat droplet of saliva landed on his back, the beast

suddenly seemed forcefully torn away from him, and he flinched at the scratches its claws left down the length of his legs. When he did look up, Nathan was standing over him, blood pouring from his hands into dark puddles in the dirt. One of the cuts in his shoulder had been opened into a wide gash, and as he lifted his hands, the blood came with it, running in thick rivers from his wound to his fingertips. The heat Elton had felt every time Nathan writhed in front of his altar fell from him now like heavy smoke, and the beast retreated as every faint movement of the witch's hands whipped a lash of blood across its scales. Each line seemed to sink into the monster's flesh like wire, dragging it closer to the ground with its own dark blood oozing from the cuts. Its wings were bound to its body by straps of blood and its face drawn down to the earth, and though it fought, Nathan remained steady, leaned forward as though to force the animal down but feet planted firmly on the ground.

"Get out, Elton," he said in a low voice, with a second deep, rolling whisper somewhere underneath.

The blond pushed to his feet through the screaming pain in his legs and made for the copse of trees, sensing the line of tingling chill that crossed his skin as he passed through the barrier. As soon as he was outside, Nathan dropped his hands and followed, the beast shrieking behind him the moment it was released. Nathan crossed the barrier at a run and slid to a stop at Elton's side just as the monster crashed into the shimmering wall, its long body crumpling in mid-air while its teeth still gnashed at them against the invisible blockade.

"Jesus Christ," Elton breathed when the animal finally gave one more irritated roar and twisted away from them, beating its wings to lift itself back toward the murky depths of its home.

Nathan's arms were red with blood that still dripped from his fingers and tinted his torn shirt, but when Elton looked into the other man's face, he was grinning.

"Don't get to see that every day, do you?"

"Thank god," Elton laughed, and Nathan clapped the blond's shoulder with one red-stained hand.

"Well done not being eaten."

It took a long, slow trudge and some strained, flickering glamour spells on Nathan's part to get them back to civilization, but the two men

eventually collapsed onto the white sofa of their hotel room and stared at the ceiling, neither of them quite able to will their body into any further movement.

Elton was hesitant to look at the man beside him. On the trip back, they'd both been focused on just getting here, and communication had been mostly nonverbal and exhausted once the adrenaline from their escape had worn off. But the thought had gnawed at Elton's brain since the moment they stood together outside the barrier in the hills—Nathan had come back for him. He'd been in the clear, free, and beyond the reach of the deadly creature—and he'd come back. He'd put himself in danger and lost enough blood to make himself pale and drowsy, and he'd done it for Elton's sake. The sharp rip in his skin still shone bright red as it seeped, though the blood on his arms and hands had begun to dry and flake away. It would have been easier for Nathan to leave him there. Elton had *expected* him to leave him there. It would have fit the profile of Nathaniel Moore as the uncaring and ruthless killer. But as many times as Elton had made jibes at Nathan about not being what he expected, as many good deeds and pitiless murders he'd seen the other man perform, one fact had somehow managed to avoid sinking in—that this unbalanced, self-absorbed, kind, and reckless enigma of a man had saved Elton's life. Literally, and, he was forced to admit, figuratively. Nathan had been right. He would never have been happy living a quiet domestic life. He'd never before felt alive the way he had standing in Nathan's apartment in Yuma that day, and every day he'd passed in the witch's company since. As much as he complained, he could never go back to a life before Nathan had led him to taking things into his own hands. He liked trouble too much.

"Nathan," Elton said, turning his head just enough to meet the dark eyes of the other man as he shifted to look over at him. "You...were a real friend to me today."

Nathan paused, watching the blond's face for a few beats of silence, and then he exhaled softly through his nose and leaned his head back against the cushion, closing his eyes as he murmured, "Apology accepted."

"We're going to need a better plan when we go back for Winnick."

"Oh, I have a few things in mind," Nathan mused, rubbing his thumbs over his knuckles to work out some of the stiffness caused by his spells. "That little shit has my bracelet. But first I'm going to have a nice long bath

and try to stop bleeding all over the furnishings. Do you want to join me? Need some help getting those pants off?"

"Pass on both," Elton scoffed, though he wasn't looking forward to peeling the fabric of his pants away from the bleeding cuts down the backs of his thighs. "Just don't come out naked for once."

Nathan grunted with effort as he eased his way to standing with both hands on the sofa. "I would never make a promise I don't intend to keep, darling."

Elton watched him head into the bathroom with the shuffle of a man whose entire body ached, and when Nathan shut the bathroom door, the blond shook his head and began to inch his way up from the cushions so that he could tend to his own injuries. He'd been cursed with a bizarre sort of friend.

12

The pair inside the house had been acting strangely. Nikita had been watching them, both in person and through the aid of his hidden fetish in the woods, for some time now. They rarely went outside other than to purchase supplies, and when they did—the ritual in the brook had been unlike any magic Nikita had seen before. He didn't understand the purpose. Nothing had happened afterward; they'd simply gone home and shut themselves indoors again. What was it for?

He had almost confronted them in the street when they had taken their trip to town, but he thought it better to get an idea of who he was dealing with. The girl was easy—Magistrate-taught spells, a small arsenal of low-level token-grounded magic, and some raw skill in sight. The man with her was an unknown. He'd requested the file from the Magistrate office in Ottawa and found a laundry list of fraternization and trafficking infractions under Chapter 787 as well as *dorche*-related offenses under Chapter 870—summoning Enochian spirits. It was forbidden for a reason; most people lacked the fortitude not to be burned alive. It was likely that this man was the same. Even possessing the necessary equipment was enough to be

arrested, so the chances that he was more dangerous than most dabblers was slight but not out of the question.

Knowing how the girl reacted to seeing him was important, so he'd let her see him—and been satisfied that her response had been fear. But the longer he waited, the longer Moore and Willis were on the loose and the more the Magister would doubt his decision to trust Nikita with this task. He intended to complete the job assigned to him sooner rather than later, and watching the house for two days had been fruitless. He had to make a move with what he had so that he could take what he needed from Daniels. And the information he had told him that the girl, at least, was tenderhearted, and her companion was the sort of person who got arrested for helping miscegenators, so it was a safe bet that he was a soft touch, too.

Which meant that the blonde woman who now lay at his feet, bleeding into the grass at the end of the yard, should be sufficient incentive to lure them out. Nikita had watched the door of her shop after his targets had left, and he'd followed her home. Anyone who sold items of interest to an Enochian witch was of interest to him, too. She wasn't innocent. She'd confirmed it when she had delivered live animals to the house—there was only one reason someone like him would need them.

Nikita placed one of his polished black oxfords on the woman's broken fibula and leaned forward, pressing his weight into the injury and creating a painful scream. It had been easy to incapacitate her; her home hadn't even been warded. The agrimony rope binding her arms should have adequately kept her from spitting any spells back at him, but he'd made certain she was in too much pain to try. The woman's cry caused a stirring in the drapes by the front door, and just as expected, the girl appeared on the front step.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she called. The woman at Nikita's feet tried to voice a warning in reply, her voice already too hoarse from screaming to reach very far.

"Come and see," Nikita answered, and as soon as the girl had both feet on the grass outside the entrance, he lifted one palm upwards. "По моей воле, Нявка, подчинение."

The girl only got another two or three steps toward him before she was overwhelmed by his summoned spirits. The birdlike sprites flooded the air around her, encircling her with threads of web from their clawed feet and dragging her face first into the dirt. Bleeding strands sprouted red on her skin where they bound and scratched her, their numbers almost hiding her

from view completely. She struggled, drawing the webbing deeper into her skin, but when she tried to call out a spell, Nikita gave a subtle twist of his extended hand, and one of the spirits dove toward her and snatched the bracelet from her wrist, snapping the cord and scattering the tokens in the grass. She tried to stretch her fingertips to reach them but could barely budge. He wouldn't risk her burning him again. The spirits hauled her across the grass closer to him, dragging her in their net to his feet. He would take her from here and lock her away where he could wear her down, and she would tell him everything she knew about Nathaniel Moore. She would give Nikita a way to kill him.

She shouted for her companion as Nikita reached for her, and the other man was out the door in an instant at the sight of the girl pinned to the ground. He had a short rod of some kind in his hand, which he lifted in preparation, but Nikita stopped him mid-step with the quick word "Adrig."

The man stumbled, his knee buckling under the bending pressure of the spell. Nikita pressed harder, the silver ring on his hand almost burning him in his effort. The carvings on the wood the man held sparked with green light, and Nikita was forced a step backward as his binding was broken. With a snarl of irritation, Nikita twitched his hand toward his opponent to divert some of the spirits to swarm around him, but the man's eyes were locked onto him, unconcerned by the scratches forming on his hands and cheeks as he lifted the carved wand.

"Rogo creā somniātōrem."

Nikita's breath left him. The weight of his own body was too much for him to bear, and he collapsed to the ground with a spasm of muscle that racked his limbs and bent them inwards. He heard a scream in his own voice but couldn't feel himself making it—his brain overloaded with a crawling sensation in his skin, scratching and pricking at the tissue underneath. His head hit the dirt as his body twisted, the scent of damp earth filling his nostrils and a sharp ringing flooding his ears. He could barely breathe, his own tongue had retreated so far down his throat. There was no movement he could make that didn't send jolts of painful contractions through his body, though he could turn his wide, wild eyes enough to see the slick black bodies of the snakes that slithered around his arms and thighs, crushing his bones. The trees around him grew tall and black into the darkening sky, threatening to enclose him in pitch and rough bark.

A writhing in his stomach sent a lurch of nausea through him, and as he jerked against the animals keeping him still, the withering grass around him dug into his face and arms like needles. Nikita heaved and coughed, choking on something that seemed desperate to escape his belly, and when it forced his mouth open, he gagged around the scales sliding from his throat as another long, black snake fell from him and coiled in the grass to hiss at him. He gasped for air and inhaled ash from his dry mouth, his spine bending to twist him back to the ground. The sky above him had turned black and empty, and the scent of sulfur burned his nose and lungs with every labored breath.

The human figures around him had vanished, but clawed hands pulled him to his knees by the front of his jacket. The snakes squeezing him spiraled up the arms of the creature that held him, and Nikita fought the grip of the thing in front of him. It was too close to human to be real—the face was too long, the eyes too wide, and mouth that revealed glistening dagger teeth was too broad. The black eyes that stared at him burned holes in his skin, and the arms that grasped him were burning and black and slick like scales.

“Evigila,” the creature growled, and Nikita slumped back heavily in its claws.

Blinding light filled his vision, and as it dimmed, the world around him seemed to dissolve, darkness melting into the muted greens of the forest. The hands holding him belonged to Thomas Proctor, as did the pale, scowling face that looked down on him.

“You only get one,” the man said, far too evenly for Nikita’s racing heart. “Don’t let me see you again.”

Nikita fell to the ground as he was released, his entire body trembling and too weak to stand. He pushed himself up on shaking hands and darted his gaze around the yard, but the girl and the shop owner were both gone, and his attacker didn’t turn back as he shut the door to the house behind him.

He found his senses after a few quick breaths and scrambled to his feet, quaking legs carrying him into the trees surrounding the house and toward the town. What kind of a spell was that? Nikita’s lungs only filled in shallow pants as he ran, sweat building on his brow and running in damp trails down his back. You let him get the better of you. You let your guard down. You let him beat you.

You let him beat you.

By the time he reached the door of his motel room, he was heaving for air, and his hands shook so badly that he could barely get his card in the lock. As soon as he was inside, he dropped to his knees on the rough carpet and doubled over, his hands fisting in his hair. He'd been so helpless—so afraid.

You let him beat you.

A rough, angry cry ripped from his throat, and his hands found the television on its cheap stand and flung it to the floor in a crash of shattered plastic and sparks. He ripped the old phone from its wire in the wall and pitched it into the bathroom mirror, sending a shower of glass onto the vanity and tinkling to the floor. His fist hit the painted wall once, twice, three times, the last strike leaving a smear of blood from his knuckles. He hiccupped and bit his cheek to stifle it as he slid down the wall, crumpling in a heap to the floor and gasping for breath with his face in his hands. His back ached with the memory of whipped lines of blood in a child's skin, hateful scorn in his ears as punishment for the crime of a failed spell or a wrong answer.

Unconscious hands pulled at his jacket and tie, his fingers snapping buttons in their rush to pull his shirt down his shoulders, and his nails scraped across the old scars on his belly, the old, instinctive spell falling from his lips so that the lines he left in his skin went deep and welled with blood. He traced a dozen lines, and more, each cut slowing his heart and steadying his breathing. The pain numbed his mind, and the copper scent of blood on his fingers was like calming incense fighting the rage in his gut.

You let him beat you.

13

Cora sat in a creaky chair in the living room, holding a jar of salve in one hand and smoothing it over her cuts with the other. Thomas had laid the shop owner on the sofa and now stood grinding herbs and oil in a stone mortar, watching the faint rise and fall of her chest. Cora watched him kneel at the edge of the couch and carefully push the mixture past her parted lips with his thumb, making her body shudder as she swallowed.

Charles and Lily had panicked when they'd come inside, but Thomas had assured them that they would be perfectly safe as long as they didn't leave the house. He promised he would take care of everything. He'd asked for some patience and privacy while he helped the woman on his couch and they had reluctantly agreed, but Cora could still see them occasionally passing by the top of the stairs on the way to far too many bathroom trips.

Cora watched Thomas smooth herbs and oils over the wounds in the woman's skin, and she flinched when the bone in her leg snapped back into place, though the woman barely stirred. Thomas was silent while he worked, his hands quick and efficient while he secured his makeshift splint. The whole house was quiet now, and Cora's blood rushed in her ears. She wasn't sure of what she had seen out there in the yard. When Thomas came

out the door, Korshunov had hit the dirt almost immediately, and he laid there motionless in the grass, his body only subtly twitching while Thomas banished the devil bird spirits or whatever they were. The Chaser hadn't cried out even once—he'd just collapsed and gone still, and Thomas had taken his time helping Cora and the other woman inside. He had even gone back out to pick all of the tokens from her broken bracelet out of the grass. Cora had watched him from the window; it hadn't looked like anything was happening at all, really, except that even in the dim evening light she could see the wild, unfocused look in Korshunov's bulging eyes, like a trapped animal.

Thomas stood once the shop owner was in a deep, peaceful sleep, and he wiped the oil from his hands on the thighs of his pants. He looked at Cora with concern still wrinkling his brow. She tilted her head as she frowned up at him from her seat.

"What did you *do*?"

He hesitated before answering. "I stopped him," he said. He reached out toward the jar in her hand. "Do you need help with that?"

She shifted in her chair and paused before handing the container over to him. She had already tended to the cuts on her arms and legs, but there were a few that she couldn't quite reach. Thomas sat on the arm of her chair as she turned her back to him, but after she tugged her shirt down just far enough to expose her shoulders and held her hair out of the way at the side of her neck, she waited. She waited for a while. Then she turned her head to peek back at Thomas, and he was sitting still behind her with a small scoop of the poultice on his fingertips, staring uncomfortably at her back.

"All right back there, champ? Are my organs showing?"

Thomas seemed startled by the question, and he glanced only briefly at her face before clearing his throat and gently smoothing the poultice over the largest gash that curved over her shoulder blade. Cora pulled her leg up under her a little more tightly and focused on the worn fabric in front of her. She'd almost expected his hands to be cold.

A soft tug in her stomach made her press her lips into a thin, thoughtful line. The cleansing ritual hadn't been as awkward as she thought it would be since Thomas was so professional about it, but it was still strange to think that she had been naked in front of him. What had he been thinking while he stood inches from her in the brook? And why did he seem weirder about putting ointment on her back than he had about pouring river water

over her bare boobs? The look on his face when he'd come into the yard after her, too—Thomas was normally so distant that to see that kind of anger from him was...strange. He always seemed irritated with her, or impatient, or like he felt like he was babysitting. Did he hate her or not?

She just didn't understand him at all. She wanted to—but she didn't.

After a quiet, tense supper with the varied occupants of the house, Thomas had called for a car and helped the shop owner down the steps to her ride. Cora listened from the doorway and heard him apologize more than once for getting her involved in any of their troubles, but as she sat in the back seat, she squeezed his hand with both of hers and thanked him earnestly for saving her life. When Thomas returned and shut the front door again, he had a soft frown on his lips as he turned the deadbolt, and Cora couldn't help feeling as if she was just a little more sealed in than she had been that morning.

Thomas glanced sidelong at her. "We can send them on their way shortly. Are you well enough?"

Cora flexed her arms and held them out toward him to show how the cuts had already turned a pale pink. "Ready for action, boss."

"This isn't a game," he said. "You need to be certain, and you need to be focused."

"This isn't my first time being an apprentice, you know."

He frowned. "The correct term is disciple, actually."

"Well whatever, fancypants," she laughed. "I'm ready."

"You've been saying the prayer I gave you?"

"I have." She perked up and put a hand on the sleeve of his sweater. "Do I get to go in the cellar?"

Thomas let out a soft sigh. "Yes, you get to go into the cellar. I promise it's not as exciting as you're expecting."

"I don't believe you."

He shook his head and went upstairs to tell their guest family that it was time. Once they had gathered in the living room with their suitcases, Thomas crouched on the floor to open the cellar door and lifted it wide so that the four of them could enter. Cora followed behind the Walkers, ducking to get beyond the ridge of the floor and reaching out a hand to steady herself on the narrow wooden steps. The stone walls were rough-cut and damp against her palm, and the wood under her feet creaked

uncertainly. They all stopped in the small room at the base of the stairs, momentarily blinded by darkness as Thomas let the door above them drop shut. The small candle in the wall sconce barely illuminated their faces, but Cora could see the grim frown on Thomas's lips as he slipped by her to put a hand on the heavy wooden door ahead.

"You wait here," he said, and the family all nodded anxiously. Thomas glanced toward Cora and tilted his head to tell her to follow; then he pushed open the door and allowed her inside behind him. The cellar itself was bigger than she expected, maybe twenty feet wide, and unnaturally warm. Tall, golden candelabras stood at the four corners of the room, each flickering with eight white candles and giving the space an eerie orange glow. A good portion of the center of the floor was covered in deeply scratched carvings that formed a circle much like the one Thomas had directed them to draw back in the hotel. Intricate patterns and lettering she couldn't read formed the inside, filled in with carefully-applied paint. At the other side of the circle, a smaller triangle had been drawn with equal care and attention to the delicate carvings, and a long, sturdy wooden table sat against one wall, laden with silver and gold instruments and stained with what Cora suspected was leftover magpie blood. She was hesitant to come very far into the room, but Thomas shut them inside and beckoned her over to a wide silver vessel on an iron pedestal.

"Hands and face," he said softly, pushing up the sleeves of his cardigan and dipping his hands into the water to allow her to follow his lead. "It's just hyssop and salt," he added when she peeked up at him curiously.

Cora nodded and did as he did, rinsing her hands and face in the lukewarm water.

"Purge me, O Lord, with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." His voice didn't quite echo in the small room, and the words came quietly and almost mechanically; Cora imagined he'd repeated them a hundred times before. She echoed them more uncertainly. She'd seen spells that required a lot of prep before, but never anything like this. This amount of protection and cleansing beforehand was unnerving.

With still dripping hands, Thomas pointed to the white silk robe hung from a nail in the wall, and she recognized it as the one he'd draped over her in the brook. She understood his meaning without being told and began to strip off her clothes, but she hesitated as she realized that Thomas was also taking off his sweater. She lowered her eyes and tried to focus on her

own business of undressing, but she couldn't help peeking over at him as he half-folded his shirt and laid it aside. But why shouldn't she look? Then they'd be even, wouldn't they? It was only fair. A small smile touched her lips as she caught a look at his rear, but it fell away at the clinking sound of metal. Thomas picked up a narrow chain with a ladder of sharp ends along one side, and he fastened it firmly around the meat of his thigh, tightening it like a belt and hooking it into place. A few drops of blood seeped from his skin where the barbs dug in, and Cora noticed a mottled ring of similar scars forming a pattern of past rituals around his leg. That was...less funny. When he caught her looking at him, she turned away in a rush and hastily pulled her robe over her head.

She looked back to see him wearing a robe the same as hers, except for a pattern of red embroidery over his heart and a thin leather apron burned with a hexagram. She watched him in silence as he lit the incense inside a golden censer on a chain. He walked the perimeter of the room, not quite touching the carvings on the floor, and when he reached her again, he lifted the censer by its chain to hang it on a hook in the ceiling. Thomas picked up a small vial from the table and tipped a few drops of oil onto his fingertips as he approached her.

"Close your eyes," he said, and when she did so, he touched the skin-warmed oil to her temples and eyelids. It smelled familiar—sandalwood, maybe. She felt a light weight touch her head, and when she looked up, her vision was blurred by a sheer length of black fabric, draped over her and hiding her eyes like a veil. She could still see through it well enough to tell how close Thomas drew to her as he fastened a thick chain around her neck, and she tensed a little at the light touch of his fingers against her hairline. The whole thing was becoming weirdly intimate. Wasn't this supposed to be a demon summoning ritual of some kind? She'd imagined it being a lot scarier. The pendant was heavy, and she turned it in her fingers as Thomas backed away from her. She couldn't identify the engravings on either side of the copper circle, which she guessed shouldn't have surprised her at this point. One looked similar to the circle on the floor—a ringed pentagram decorated with lettering—but on the other side, a sigil filled the space. A curved marking detailed with circles and small crosses made up the center, and around the outer ring, finally, there were letters she could read—BATHIN. The name didn't mean anything to her, but it was something she could look up later, at least.

Thomas had applied the oil to himself and laid a similar veil over his own head, hiding his eyes but leaving his mouth and chin visible, and he hooked a pendant like hers around his neck. He approached her with a dinner-plate-sized silver disc covered in dark engravings and placed it gently in her hands.

“Hold this directly in front of your face when we begin,” he said. “Do not move it, no matter what.”

“Okay,” she answered.

He must have heard the apprehension in her voice, because he paused in front of her. “You can’t be afraid, Cora. You’re sure you want to stay?”

“I do.” She looked up at him, though it was impossible to see his eyes through both layers of veil. “I trust you.”

Thomas let a beat of silence pass, and then he nodded. “Okay.” He gestured to a spot near the edge of the circle. “Stand here.”

While she did as she was told, he opened the door to let the family inside. The adults didn’t seem put off in the slightest by the strangeness of the ritual as they positioned themselves in the inner ring, but the little girl stuck close to her father’s legs, both hands clutched tightly around the beaded trinket Nathan had made for her. Charles bent down to give her a reassuring hug.

“It’s going to be fine, sweetie. There’s nothing to be scared of. It’s just Thomas and Cora under there. Hold my hand and shut your eyes, and before you know it, we’ll be safe at our new home.”

Grace nodded, squeezing her father’s hand and hiding her face in his shirt.

Thomas took his place beside Cora, his wand in his right hand and a longer walking stick carved with similar markings in his left. He let the end of the staff rest on the floor directly in front of him and held it tight.

“I’ll begin,” he said, and the couple in front of them nodded. Cora held tightly to her disc, lifting it in front of her face. She could still see Thomas at her side, but the bulk of the room ahead was hidden from her, so she focused on him instead.

Thomas’s voice droned low and even in the heady room. “I do invoke and conjure thee, O Spirit, Bathin, and being with power armed from the Supreme Majesty, I do strongly command thee, by Him Who spake and it was done, and unto whom all creatures be obedient, that thou dost forthwith appear unto me here before this Circle. Wherefore come thou, O Spirit,

Bathin, manifesting that which I shall desire, for thou art conjured by the name of the Living and True God, Helioren; wherefore fulfill thou my commands according to mine interest.”

The temperature in the room rose sharply, bringing up sweat on Cora’s brow, and a hot wind buffeted her from the opposite side of the room, plastering her robe to her skin and forcing her to brace herself to stay in place. She was a little tempted to move the disc and peek despite Thomas’s warning, but she went still at the sensation of thick, wet air like warm breath against her skin. The sickening scent of brimstone filled her nose, the rotten egg smell turning her stomach. Thomas’s continuing invocations dulled in her ears, muffled by the pounding headache and nausea overtaking her. Sweat poured from her, pooling in the corners of her eyes and mouth, and she swallowed back bile rising in her throat. She shut her eyes to help keep grounded, though she could feel her fingers trembling to keep the disc at the level of her eyes.

A throb of energy swayed her on her feet, and the pressure in the air around her climbed steadily, until her ears popped, her body grew heavy, and the room went cold. She stayed as still as she could, subtly trembling, until she felt the gentle touch of Thomas’s hand on her arm, allowing her to lower the disc. The circle in front of them was empty save a few disappearing wisps of smoke that rose from the carved letters in the stone floor—the Walkers were gone.

Thomas took the disc from her aching hands but remained standing in front of her. “Domine, Omnia Potens, Æterne Deus et Pater omnium Creaturarum, qui effusus est super me Divinia Gratia Tua Misericordia, quia sum Tua Creatura. Amen.”

Cora looked up at him, about to ask if that meant they were finished so that she could sit down, but Thomas closed the distance between them and touched his mouth to hers. He didn’t jerk away instantly, but he didn’t linger, either—it was a brief, chaste kiss, but it left her lips feeling warm just the same. As he pulled back from her, he took her veil with him, and he reached behind her neck to unclasp her necklace before he turned his back to her to replace them on the table. She watched him slip his own veil from his head and fold it on the table, then take off his own pendant and apron, but he didn’t look back at her, and he didn’t say a word, so she stayed silent, too. She pulled her robe over her head, hung it back on its nail, and dressed

as quickly as she could, since Thomas seemed to be keeping his attention on the table to give her some privacy.

She almost asked one of the dozen questions waiting on her tongue, but when Thomas simply laid his hands on the table in front of him and looked down at the worn surface, she bit her lip and made her way hurriedly back up the stairs. She let the cellar door drop behind her and walked stiffly up to her bedroom, where she shut the door and sat straight-backed on the edge of her mattress. He'd been right. That was scary. It was weird, and somehow disgusting, and scary. Cora wasn't even sure what had happened, really—had the demon been in the room with them, or was Thomas just channeling it? Whatever it was he'd been doing, it hadn't felt safe by any stretch of the imagination. She was glad she hadn't dared look.

The kiss had definitely been part of the ritual. Cora didn't know why that sort of thing would be necessary, but it had been so fleeting, so light, that it couldn't have been anything but a part of the ritual. It definitely was.

Cora's skin prickled, and as she ran her fingertips lightly over her mouth, her stomach gave a not-unpleasant little flip. Oh.

Oh no.

14

It was strange to think of an evening following being chased by some sort of lake monster dragon as relaxing, but with Nathan too exhausted to want to go out, it was actually a quiet night. Elton was thankful. It gave them a chance to do their research and work on a plan for how to get at Winnick *without* being thrown back on a lake shore. In theory, at least. In reality, all they'd done was have food brought up to the hotel room, tended to their injuries, and sat smoking on the suite's balcony.

"We ought to drag him out of that bland office, strap him to the hood of a car, and leave *him* to be eaten by that beast," Nathan said, his arms dangling over the railing and his cheek resting on the metal as he leaned forward in his chair.

"A little dramatic." Elton exhaled smoke and took another sip of his coffee. "Even for you."

"Says the man who left a message on a wall in blood not long ago."

"That was purposeful. And was seen. Who's going to see it if Winnick is eaten in the middle of nowhere?"

Nathan sat up and tapped his temple with one of the fingers holding his cigarette. "Now that's thinking, darling; what's the point if people don't

know what we did it for? The Magistrate will cover it up, and that's no kind of message."

"Maybe we could leave them a note."

"I like this sardonic side of you, Elton," Nathan chuckled. "It's a good balance to my boundless optimism."

Elton put out the stub of his cigarette and discarded it in one of Nathan's empty beer bottles. "We need to get this done quickly. If Winnick is confirmed on the council, our job will be a lot harder. For now, we have the advantage that he probably thinks we're both dead. We should use it."

Nathan snorted and flicked the ash from his cigarette over the edge of the railing. "Arrogant. Me, killed by a banker and a couple of henchmen."

"Who's arrogant, here?"

"Do you think his intestines are long enough to spell it if we pin them to his desk? Maybe in cursive."

"We're drifting from the task at hand."

"I've seen what happens when witch supremacists come into power, Elton. We had a council like that back in the 1940's—taking cues from across the pond, I suppose. The pressure doesn't just affect the regs unfortunate enough to know one of us; everyone feels it. More people spend more time in prison, or under the cuimne, or in a noose. That sort of sentiment coupled with the uncompromising nature of the Magistrate's current proposal is a recipe for disaster. I won't see that sort of man in a council seat again. Bad enough he's a Magister."

"Do you think you could spell all of that if we used his henchmen's intestines, too?"

"I like where your mind is on this, but don't mock me." Nathan took another long drag from his cigarette and leaned back in his seat, crossing one leg over the other. "But you know—I think you've given me an idea."

The bank building still showed a pattern of lit windows even after dark. Overtime employees, janitors, and security guards kept the offices occupied after closing, but the entire complex was dull and quiet, a muted mirror of the bustle of the day. Nathan scuffed out his cigarette with one boot and glanced at the blond by his side.

"How's the shoulder? Still working after the fall you took?"

"I'll manage," Elton answered, though his joint still ached. They had taken enough time for Nathan to string together a replacement set of

groundings and for Elton to draw up some new talismans, but then they had made straight for the bank again despite their still-tender injuries. This late at night, either Winnick would still be diligently working away, and they would be able to finish the task they'd been given, or he would be gone, and they could scour his office for his home address and pay him a separate visit. No matter which turned out to be true, they had both decided that waiting around would serve no one.

"Well," Nathan said, "then let's have the thing done, hm? Take two." Without waiting for confirmation, Nathan moved toward the front door, put his hand on the glass, and pushed it open, the glass seamlessly swinging away from its metal frame. It hung open as Nathan and Elton stepped through without disturbing the door itself or its lock, then snapped back into place as though it had never moved. Nathan had offered to simply crash through back in the hotel room, but Elton had pointed out the difficulty in getting away again if the mundane police showed up.

They split up once they crossed the lobby, each taking a separate bank of elevators to be better able to clear the top floor once they reached it. Elton flattened a slip of paper over the button panel and pressed it under his palm, illuminating the light for the 40th floor. It seemed strange to be essentially storming a building as an accomplice to Nathaniel Moore, but he supposed it wasn't the first or the last time. At least he felt confident that he was doing the right thing.

When the elevator doors opened, Elton found himself face to face with a poorly-timed security patrol who looked almost as startled to be seen as he was. Elton snapped out one of the many binding spells he'd prepared, and it stuck fast to the guard's mouth, dropping him to the carpet in a heap of limbs. The blond stepped over him and moved down the hallway, occasionally pausing to let a janitor pass before stepping up behind them to put them easily to sleep. These people may have worked for Winnick, but they weren't likely to know anything about his important goings-on, and the regular bank employees were likely to be mundane. There was no reason to kill everyone in sight.

Nathan apparently disagreed.

A door down the hall crashed off of its hinges as a screaming body flew through it, hitting the opposite wall legs-up and leaving a splatter of blood on the wallpaper as it crumpled to the floor. Nathan's laughter rang down

the corridor, and Elton sighed. He spotted Nathan poking his head through the doorway, a bright grin on his face as he caught sight of the blond.

“Good exercise, isn’t it?” he called, and Elton waved him off.

A shouted binding spell rocked Elton on his feet, pulling him down to the ground, but he slid one of his papers onto the floor and sent it toward his attacker with a sharp exhale. The talisman raced up the bodyguard’s leg and wrapped around his throat, squeezing until the man began to turn purple. Elton dusted off his knees as he stood, the spell’s hold broken as the guard lost consciousness. Nathan appeared beside him, his shirt somehow already stained with blood, and they turned the corner to the tall wooden doors that marked Winnick’s office. His secretary’s desk outside was empty, so Nathan leaned over the computer monitor to touch the intercom button. After a brief, muffled ring on the other side of the doors, a brusque voice crackled through the phone.

“What is it? I thought you’d gone home.”

“No such luck,” Nathan laughed, and Elton could almost feel the chill in the silence that followed. “May we come in?”

No answer came, so Elton took the liberty of turning the handle on the office door and giving it a shove. Winnick stood behind his desk with a string of silver beads clutched tightly in his fist like a rosary, glaring at the two intruding men.

“How?” he murmured in a low, furious growl. “You two are dead already.”

“I have to say,” Nathan began as he crossed the room, pausing to hop up and sit on the surface of Winnick’s desk. “I’ve been killed a half-dozen times—and this wasn’t even one of the better attempts.”

“Césad,” Winnick snarled, crushing his beads in his hand. Elton knew the spell—it was standard Magistrate-approved torture, used for extracting unlikely confessions. He stepped forward to intercede, and Nathan jumped as the spell touched him and tensed his grip on the edge of the desk, but then he paused, his eyes shutting and his head falling back as he took a slow, deep breath in. He let his head roll to his shoulder, and a predator’s smile spread across his lips as he gazed back at the Magister with cold, black eyes.

“Is that the best you can do?”

Winnick fumbled, and Nathan gave a taunting shudder as the spell slipped free of him.

“Fè jan ou di,” he said firmly, and Winnick dropped instantly into his office chair, hands fastened tightly to the arms. “I hoped you’d at least be a challenge, but you’re just an old man hiding behind people who make less in a year than you pay for a suit, aren’t you? You think that’s the sort of council the Magistrate needs?”

“The Magistrate needs *order*,” Winnick ground out with his head pressed forcefully against the back of his chair.

“It’ll have to make do without your kind of order, fortunately.” Nathan circled the desk and opened a few drawers with casual slowness, finally letting out a soft sound of victory as he scooped up his stolen bracelet. He slipped it over his hand and ran his fingers over the tokens affectionately while he turned to Elton, who had moved backward toward the door to keep an eye out for any security they may have missed. “What do you think, darling? What does he deserve? A quick death, or a fun one?”

“I think we’d better get on with it, if you’re done being dramatic.”

“Never. But I suppose you’re right.” He tilted his head at Winnick, who had begun to sweat and go ruddy in his struggle against the spell keeping him still. “I think I’ll leave him in your hands, Mr. Willis.”

“Mine? Why? Just kill him and let’s go.”

Nathan stepped over to Elton and gave him a genial pat on the shoulder. “You are so much better at sending messages,” he purred, and he urged the blond farther inside with a gentle push and shut the office door with him inside, leaving him alone with the trapped Magister.

Elton hesitated, watching the helpless man glaring at him from the leather seat, and he snorted softly. Fine. If they were going to send a message, they should send a clear one.

Elton wiped at the blood on his hands with a handkerchief from his pocket. The sounds of Winnick’s shouts and pleading had gone numb in his ears some time ago, so that the blond didn’t even look up as he crouched to run his damp handkerchief down the Magister’s bound arms to clear the seeping red away from the letters he had cut there. Elton stood and crossed the room, once more checking the security of the cord that ran from the antlers of Winnick’s mounted statue to his neck. Stepping over the man’s still legs, Elton spread one of his talismans onto the cool glass of the window, running his thumb slowly over the paper to smooth out any bubbles. Then he breathed softly on the black ink characters staining the

yellow paper and took a step back as the glass began to crack. Spiderwebs spread quickly from the center of the talisman, creaking like the icy surface of a lake until the lines reached the metal frame and the glass shattered, forced into glittering pieces that fell onto the landscaped entry below. The wind from this high up howled as it ran past the open window, tousling Elton's hair. He crouched behind Winnick and lifted him to his feet under his armpits, leaving him standing on the precipice of the open 40th floor.

Elton touched one of his papers to the Magister's forehead, the older man's body slumping as he was finally released from Nathan's binding, but he didn't dare turn around. His frame trembled, and his hoarse voice still begged, but Elton ignored him. He gave the cord around Winnick's neck one final testing tug.

The Magister argued, babbled, and even offered forgiveness and exemption from punishment, but when he turned his head to look Elton in the eyes, he stopped.

"Please," he said simply.

Elton stared at him, unmoved, and only tilted his chin toward the open window and the whipping wind. Winnick slowly went still, hands still trembling as he faced the outside air, and at Elton's forceful push, he fell. The cord sang as it snapped taut, and Elton heard the dull thud of the Magister's body on the glass a story below. He leaned forward to look down and caught a few moments of Winnick's heels thrashing against the windows with ringing impacts before he went still, a few final droplets of blood falling from the deep marks Elton had made in his forearms.

Subject to Repression.

Elton took a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh, but on his way to the door to fetch Nathan, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out, pausing to wipe away the thumbprint of blood he left on the screen as he turned it on. There was a text from Cora waiting for him that was so long it trailed away into ellipses on the notification. With a frown, he opened the message, his furrowed brow slowly relaxing into disbelief the longer he read.

Elton, first of all please don't tell Nathan. He'll never let me forget that he was right and he'll say 'I told you so' and I just cannot handle hearing that right now. So I've been helping Thomas at the house, right? Like I said, right? And he's so rude and aloof and he keeps telling me to leave him alone and not touch his stuff. But he's also kind of weirdly nice sometimes?

And I told him I wanted to help for real so he took me out and did this weird cleansing thing so I could go into his creepy cellar, which by the way HE TRIED TO KILL A BLACK CAT LIKE A REAL OLD-TIMEY SATANIC PANIC WITCH and the people he helped were so grateful and they seemed so happy, and he was actually nice to them. And I don't know if Nathan told you that Korshunov was here but he was and Thomas did something really bad to him and he kind of rescued me? And then when we did the ritual to send away the couple you sent us he let me help and it was really weird but at the end he kissed me? But like it was totally part of the ritual I think because then he didn't say anything and now I'm upstairs and it's so WEIRD HERE NOW because I didn't feel nothing when he did it. I think I might like him. Like maybe I'm in like with him. And I need you not to tell Nathan because he'll tease me and give Thomas shit and I also need you to tell me that this is a terrible idea and to confirm my decision to just go be a nun in the middle of Australia somewhere forever because I clearly cannot be trusted to have good timing or good taste in dudes. So please tell me I'm being a stupid kid and reading too much into things or I should just go be a nun. Please.

Elton stared at his phone's screen, scrolling back up to the top of the message more than once, incredulous that a single text message could be so long. The content was even worse. Nathan opened the office door to poke his head in, and Elton hastily stuffed his phone back into his pocket. He was going to need some more sleep before he attempted to squeeze a coherent thought out of his brain on the subject of Cora having a crush on his old demon-summoning roommate.

15

Thomas knelt on the floor of his bedroom, his hands resting lightly on his knees and his eyes closed as he lowered his head to murmur the same prayer he'd recited thousands of times. The hard press of the wood on his knees hadn't bothered him for years.

"O Lord God, Who are seated upon the Heavens, and Who regardest the Abysses beneath, grant unto me Thy Grace I beseech Thee, so that what I conceive in my mind I may accomplish in my work, through Thee, O God, the Sovereign Ruler of all, Who livest and reignest unto the Ages of the Ages. Amen."

He took another slow breath before standing. Letting Cora join in on the ritual last night had been a mistake. He should have warned her about the kiss—he'd meant to warn her. But every time he'd opened his mouth to try, it had seemed too painfully uncomfortable. Somehow it had been better to just do it, then keep his back to her until she either left or the heat in his face had faded away. It didn't mean anything, regardless—it was just awkward. Cora was young and excitable, and likely to read far too much into a simple ritual tradition. And now that she had seen the sort of magic

he really did, she was just as likely to catch the first flight she could to wherever Elton and Moore had gone.

Thomas hesitated just inside his bedroom door. It would be better if she left. Then things could go back to normal.

Downstairs, he found Cora just as he did every morning—sitting at the kitchen table, chewing on a simple breakfast. The only thing missing was her usual impatient glare as he passed; today, she slammed her phone face down on the surface of the table and stared at him with her eyebrows raised as though he'd already accused her of something she was prepared to deny. The cat lay sprawled on the wood surface nearby, the tip of its tail twitching idly as it snoozed, apparently undisturbed by the sudden noise.

"Good morning," she said around a mouthful of bread that she hastily swallowed.

"Good morning. Are you feeling all right? I got a fever the first few times I performed those rituals."

"I...didn't sleep very well. But I'm fine. Thanks."

Thomas poured himself a cup of coffee from the steel kettle that sat near the fire, grateful for the gap in his fasting between rituals. He would have to start up again as soon as they had anyone else he needed to send away, but for now, he could at least enjoy a cup of coffee in the mornings.

"Thomas," Cora started in a soft voice, and he paused. Here it came. Now she'd be leaving. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead," he answered, lingering near the fireplace with his mug rather than moving to sit beside her.

"So you...all this stuff that you do, the preparation, the not eating...it helps you do your magic, right? Part of your deal with the demon?"

"It's necessary. Yes."

"And the praying?"

"Yes."

"So do you believe? In capital-G God, I mean? You're a Christian?"

Thomas let a soft snort escape him. "Not exactly. The things that I do have very little to do with Christ. No; the prayers are the same incantations they've been for hundreds of years. Whether it matters to the demon that they're said or whether some other being wants them said doesn't really make any difference to me. The rituals work, the demon works for me, as long as I follow the rules. If I don't, then it doesn't have to follow them, either. And I want it to follow the rules."

Cora nodded, staring down at the remnant of buttered bread in her hand. “I’ve never been religious, either,” she said. “My mom and dad would go to church on Christmas and Easter, and they’d take me, but it never seemed to mean anything to them. Then once I found out about all this magic stuff, it kind of started to seem like everything is true at least a little bit, so religion was sort of out the window.”

Thomas held his mug in both hands, letting the coffee warm his fingers. “Claire was religious,” he said quietly, and then he paused. He hadn’t really meant to talk about her—but when he looked over at Cora, she was watching him attentively with a faint smile on her face. “She...knew what I was, and she still believed. She said that if magic was real, it was more proof of the divine, not less. Never made me go to church, though—she probably thought I really would catch fire.”

Cora smiled at him, but she still seemed slightly subdued. “Thanks for actually answering.”

Thomas frowned into his cup. He’d been rude to her since she arrived; he knew it. He was used to being on his own. Cora’s energy level was frequently too high for him, and she’d seemed determined to pry herself a place in his life. Still—she *had* been trying to help. And her subdued manner this morning put a little weight of guilt in his belly.

“It’s...part of the requirements,” he said, and she looked up at him. “In the time leading up to the ritual, I have a lot of restrictions. One of them is a bar on ‘useless discourse.’ So not talking more than is strictly necessary. It was easier to keep away from you than to ignore you outright. I also had a lot of preparation to do; this house has been abandoned for some time, and the cellar was in disrepair. It needed to be cleaned up and reconsecrated before the Walkers got here.”

She brightened a little. “I think this is more than you’ve said to me the entire time I’ve been here. Does this mean you’re gonna be all chatty now?”

“Not likely.”

“Didn’t think so.” She stuffed the last of the bread in her mouth and watched him drink his coffee for a few passing moments, though he didn’t look back at her. Being in the room with her was a little like torture—he kept waiting for her to ask the question he knew must be on her mind. The kiss of peace wasn’t that strange a concept to him, but to someone uninitiated in this sort of tradition, it must have been a shock. He cursed

himself again for not warning her and cutting off these awkward conversations before they had to happen.

“So how come the house was empty for so long?” she asked instead, reaching out to scratch the cat’s black fur on its haunches. “Your dad must have left it to you, right? You said he was the one from here?”

“You really don’t want to know my life story, Cora; trust me.”

“I didn’t ask for your life story, man. Just how did you end up the heir to a creepy witch house with a built-in demon-summoning cellar?”

Thomas took another drink of his coffee so that he didn’t have to answer right away. How was he supposed to answer? Tell her that his entire family had been making deals with the spirits that chose them for generations? That his legacy was one of ritual, sacrifice, and early death? She’d taunt him at best and pity him at worst.

“I told you my parents are dead,” he said simply. “But they didn’t live here after my grandparents died, and neither did I. So no one’s been here since I was a kid.”

“You don’t have any siblings or cousins or anything?”

He shook his head. “It’s just me that’s left.”

“Well that’s...sad,” she said quietly.

“It is what it is.”

“Did you come visit? Like, childhood summers at the witch house?”

“A few times. I hated it. Too much...pressure.”

“Pressure?”

Cora’s phone began to ring on the table beside her, making her jump, and she flipped it over to check the screen. A smile flashed across her face as she picked up the phone and put it to her ear. “You’re up early.” She looked up at Thomas and mouthed, “It’s Nathan.”

Thomas almost walked out of the room to give her some privacy, but she waved frantically at him and pointed to the seat next to her, then looked down at her phone screen and tapped it to turn on the speaker as he approached.

“...so we’ll be in touch with Señora Marquez shortly and see what she wants to do,” Moore’s voice said.

“So you killed that guy?” Cora asked. “The one they wanted for the council?”

“They’re not likely to want him anymore,” the man on the line laughed.

“Are you guys coming back here?”

“Mm. No, I don’t think so,” Moore answered, and Cora visibly deflated. “There’s a lot to do on the West coast. Elton’s found some nearby candidates for a firm talking-to from that list he pilfered in Toronto, so we’ll probably do that. He’s in a fiery mood, my love; you should see him.”

“Not a word I would ever use to describe Elton.”

“You haven’t seen him with some liquor in him.” Cora only laughed, so he went on. “In any case—do you want to come along? I’d be happy to give you a rescue from that dreary personage you’ve been cohabitating with.”

“I can hear you,” Thomas pointed out.

“Suppose your ears work, then. Good day, Mr. Proctor; have you been taking good care of my girl?”

“He’s been great,” Cora cut in before Thomas could bite back.

“I should hope so. How about it, my love? Want a plane ticket going West? We’re going to see Monterrey.”

Cora hesitated, glancing between Thomas and the screen of her phone. “But if you guys find people who need help, you’re going to send them back here, right?”

“Presumably. That was the arrangement, wasn’t it, Mr. Proctor?”

“I’m prepared for guests,” Thomas said. “I’ve been able to make contact with some people I know who have connections to safe houses and transportation.”

“Then...I think I’ll stay,” Cora said after a moment. “I’m not so good at murdering people anyway, and it’ll be easier here with two. Thomas even let me into the creepy cellar!” she added brightly.

“Did he now,” Nathan murmured, and Thomas could almost hear the look of disdain on his face. “Isn’t that nice of him?” Thomas didn’t know what he’d done, exactly, to earn Nathaniel Moore’s sour opinion of him, but it wasn’t something he was looking to antagonize.

“Cora, I really don’t need help,” Thomas said. “I did this on my own for years.”

“And wasn’t it easier with someone here to help take care of things while you dipped your knives in blood or whatever? Didn’t it help not having to make dinner, at least? Even if you don’t trust me to do your spooky demon magic, I can at least help with the normal stuff.”

“Tell him what happened with the Chaser,” Thomas said softly. “You’re a target here.”

“What Chaser?” Nathan demanded from across the country. “Korshunov? You saw him again?”

“I mean,” Cora sighed, “okay, so, he came to the house and tried to kill us maybe, but he didn’t! Thomas scared him off!” She pointed an accusing finger up at his face. “And anyway, *you* said it was safe in the house!”

“It is.”

Cora lifted her hands in a defensive shrug, as if her point was made for her. Thomas sighed through his nose as he stared down at her.

“Soo,” Nathan said following the pause, “is that a no on the plane ticket? Staying in the family manor?”

“He just doesn’t want to admit he wants me here.”

“Well it’s your choice, my love. I’ll be in touch when I know the plan going forward. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she chuckled. “Oh—wait. Put Elton on the phone.” Cora scooped up her cell and turned off the speaker, holding it to her ear and giving Thomas a passing smile as she hurried out of the room while hissing into the phone, “I see you leaving me on read, you ass!”

Thomas watched her go, then sat down at the table to finish his coffee. He frowned over at the cat as it lifted its head to peer at him, but with a soft snort, he reached a hand out and rubbed behind its ear with one finger. He let a faint smile touch his lips as the animal’s breath began to pleasantly rumble. “What am I going to do about her, Herman?”

16

THREE MONTHS LATER

Elton fought with the clutch on the RV, grinding the engine to life and turning around in the driver's seat to shout out the open side door.

"I'm going to leave you here!"

Nathan clambered up the metal steps, then crouched to pull them up into place and slam the door shut. "You complain when I smoke inside, you complain when I smoke outside," he grumbled, swaying on his feet as the vehicle began to move away from the campground. He dropped into the passenger seat and propped his crossed ankles up on the dashboard, reaching down to the cup holder between them to take a drink from his water bottle.

"Just tell me where we're going," Elton sighed as he pulled onto the road.

The RV had been Nathan's idea, of course—and while Elton had argued on principle, he couldn't really dispute the logic. With a—stolen—RV in their possession, they not only had a way to keep on the run without having to avoid the growing number of Chasers present at every public transport

station, they also had a mobile summoning circle, which Nathan had carefully measured and burned into the floor. As long as they parked the RV facing the right direction, they could send the displaced people they snatched from the Magistrate straight to Thomas without leaving a trail of destroyed hotel rooms in their wake. This last point was perhaps the most important, as it meant that the Magistrate only rarely caught up to them. No one had yet suspected that Nathaniel Moore might be traveling cross-country in a camper, Elton guessed. For once, Nathan's reputation for luxury was working in their favor, though the trade-off had been that Elton had been forced to learn more than he'd ever anticipated necessary about RV engines. The thing broke down almost as often as it drove.

They had already sent at least a dozen individuals and couples back through the house in Salem as well as making a significant dent in Elton's list. Nathan wasn't exceptionally pleased at the fact that the last woman they'd helped relocate had recognized him with admiration instead of fear—apparently she was a cousin of Charles Walker, who had sung the dangerous witch's praises. Nathan had been right, however, in his prediction that Elton's reputation would also grow. More than once, now, he had shown up at the home of someone who, up until his arrival, had been protected by the Magistrate, only to be bargained with or begged. He couldn't pretend it wasn't satisfying.

The other downside was that the two men had been sharing exceptionally close quarters for the last several weeks. Elton had listened to countless Creole conversations while he drove and Nathan paced the length of the vehicle, chatting with Adelina, and he'd lost count of the number of times Nathan had come out of the small shower naked. It didn't even bother Elton anymore. Most importantly, the pair of twin beds at the rear of the vehicle were only a scant two feet apart, which had led to what felt like infinite late-night whispers of, "Elton, are you awake?"

Nathan dug his phone from his rear pocket and brought up a map on the screen, scratching at his cheek while the app chose the best directions for them. "Which one was this one, again?" he asked. "The actress or the sex trafficker?"

"The actress *is* the sex trafficker."

"Oh." Nathan snorted out a laugh. "So, that one?"

"Yes, that one."

“Down south again, to sunnier climes at last. If we’d spent one more week in Portland, I would have started pissing vegan cheese.”

“Poetic. At least the mountains were nice. Makes me a little homesick.”

“There aren’t any Canadian evildoers you want to pick off before summer ends and they all hole up in their igloos to weather the winter?”

“Not yet.”

Nathan tossed his phone onto the dashboard as the robotic voice began to direct them toward the highway, and he picked at his fingernails in the silence that followed. “Cora told me last night that one of Mr. Proctor’s contacts has gone dark. They think he’s been picked up.”

“That’s the third one, isn’t it?”

“Mhm. We’re going to run out of people to trust if this keeps up.”

“Too many people going missing,” Elton sighed. “They can’t all just be being executed, can they?”

“They’d have a line out the door. Señora Marquez says they aren’t letting her into many council meetings anymore, but maybe she knows something she hasn’t told us.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to send you on any more assassinations, since the last one didn’t seem to help much.”

“It helped!” Nathan countered. “The man she wanted ended up on the council, didn’t he?”

“For all the good it did. The Order is still in effect. Chasers are fucking everywhere. People are still disappearing. They’re being tortured or hanged no matter how many people we kill. We can make a dent by sending some back to Thomas, but that won’t stop what the Magistrate is doing. Did you talk to that woman back in Medford? She said her sister hasn’t even gone to the Magistrate about a man she thinks is poisoning her husband because she’s afraid of being arrested for something herself. The Chasers aren’t even doing their jobs; they’re just gestapo now.”

“Sorry you quit?”

Elton glanced sidelong at him with a thin frown on his lips. “Why don’t you call Ms. Marquez and ask if she’s heard anything? There may be a better way we can be spending our time. If the Magistrate is closing in on Thomas’s contacts, they’re going to be closing in on him.”

Nathan leaned across the gap between their seats to tilt his head at the blond. “You haven’t been enjoying our time together, darling? But you’ve come so far.”

“Will you please just call?” Elton watched the road ahead of him while his companion reached for his phone again, only half listening to the brisk Spanish coming from the seat next to him. Having the councilwoman available to them hadn’t given them as much insight as Elton had hoped in the previous weeks—it seemed that the outnumbered opponents of the Order of Repression were simply being cut out of the decision-making process. Marquez’s own life may even be in danger soon, but it wasn’t feasible for the two of them to just pick their way through the council one by one, no matter how many times Nathan suggested it.

Nathan went quiet beside him, and after a few more subdued exchanges, he ended the call and let his phone rest in his lap. “Well, we’re certainly going to get our sunshine, Elton.”

“Why’s that?”

“She asked me to check on a site not too far from here. She can’t confirm it with anyone since she’s being locked out of meetings, but she thinks they’re keeping people. Lots of people—not just in the prisons. She overheard someone talk about a something called an ‘isolation camp.’ I don’t like either of those words, and I dislike them even more put together.”

Elton gripped the steering wheel a little harder. “Neither do I.” He nodded toward the phone in Nathan’s hand. “Tell me where to go.”

It wasn’t possible to get Google Maps directions to a secret Magistrate prison camp, but Marquez had been able to point them in the right direction. Once they reached the California state line, they had no choice but to start traveling smaller back roads, taking their time while Nathan hung halfway out the passenger window and kept a seeking spell active along the way. Their chances of happening upon the camp were slim, but with Thomas’s contacts dwindling, they didn’t have many options for information.

By the end of the third day, they had searched what felt like every square foot of three of the state’s northernmost counties with no luck. Elton stopped the RV at a campground alongside a wide creek and stretched his arms over his head as soon as his feet touched solid earth.

“I’m on the verge of turning myself in just so that I can be sent to this camp myself,” Nathan lamented, leaning against the warm hood of the vehicle with an already-lit cigarette in his hand and offering another to the blond, who took it gratefully.

“Need a ride?”

“You could come with me. We haven’t had a good prison break in a while.”

Elton snorted and took a long drag of his cigarette. “We need to have a better plan than this. Just driving around hoping that we run into it isn’t going to work.”

Nathan straightened and rapped the blond on the bicep with the back of his hand. “We’re idiots,” he said around the cigarette tucked into the corner of his mouth, then plucked it from his lips with two fingers. “Aren’t we looking for something hidden? Unknown? *Distant*?”

“Don’t make me guess, Nathan.”

“We know a young woman back in Massachusetts who has a talent for finding hidden things, don’t we?”

Elton paused. “We are idiots.” He opened the door to the RV and took his phone from the center console. He didn’t have to scroll very far to dial Cora’s number, since he only had five numbers in his phone.

“Tell her she has to come here and do it, so she can get away from her glum housemate,” Nathan said, and Elton hissed him away as he raised the phone to his ear.

Cora started at the sound of her phone on the kitchen table and wiped the flour from her hands with a nearby towel before answering. “Hey; you’re alive! What’s up?”

“Bad news from Marquez,” Elton answered. “She thinks the Magistrate has set up some kind of camp for the prisoners it’s keeping, but we don’t know where it is.”

“Jesus,” Cora breathed. “A camp? Is that where we are now?”

“This probably isn’t the only one. It’s just the one that’s closest. Think you can help us find it?”

“I can try. What do you have to go on?”

“Nothing except ‘North California.’ We don’t even know how big it is.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can do. Jesus,” she said again. “This is only getting worse, isn’t it? I thought we were doing everything we could, but...are we even helping at all?”

“We’re helping the people the Magistrate *doesn’t* have because of us. For now, that’s all we can do. If we find this camp, maybe we can do more.”

“Okay,” Cora sighed. “I’ll call you later. Hug Nathan for me.”

“I won’t.”

“I know,” she said with a smile. “Bye, Elton.”

“Thanks, Cora.”

She put down the phone when he ended the call and leaned against the counter with a sigh. Camps. She couldn’t even say that she couldn’t believe it was happening anymore—they had seen too many people pass through the house in the last three months who had friends that had simply disappeared in the night or barely escaped the Chasers themselves. Cora had even heard that Magistrate officials weren’t safe anymore if they were on the wrong side of the Order. Calero, the Magister who had helped her in Miami, had gone “mysteriously missing” a month ago. They were running out of allies.

Thomas was exhausting himself trying to keep up. Cora did what she could to help, but he was clearly more comfortable performing the rituals on his own—and she wasn’t particularly sad about not having to pray a hundred times a day anymore, if she was honest. So she helped in other ways. She tended the garden of herbs they’d cultivated in the back yard, kept the guest rooms organized and their passing through refugees fed, and she went into town to do the shopping. She’d even gotten pretty good at baking fresh bread in the weird little shelf oven in the fireplace, which she considered important to Thomas’s mental health, since bread was sometimes all he was allowed to eat by the restrictions placed upon him by his demon.

She also used her scrying mirror to help pinpoint the people who might need them most. It had been difficult at the beginning, looking for people she’d never met in places she’d never been, but she was getting better. It was becoming easier to lose focus and see what the mirror allowed her to see. She hoped she’d be able to find this camp—though she wasn’t excited about what she might see there.

Cora left her dough behind to rise and trotted upstairs to her room, passing by the cellar door without a glance. Thomas would come out in the evening, like he always did. She’d gotten used to the quiet of the house during the day when they didn’t have guests, and when she’d stopped pushing quite so hard, Thomas had become less distant all on his own. They even had conversations in the evenings now—they would sit in the study together and have tea or coffee, and he would help her read some of the books from his bedroom. She was getting good at Hebrew. He had even let

her borrow his disgusting human leather book so that she could copy it. Apparently the contents had been his gift from the demon when he'd made his deal with it—a lexicon of every magical herb and precious stone there was, passed to him through a two-day-long trance of automatic writing and sketches. He said that he'd come to his senses with the book completed on his desk, but that he hadn't needed it since. The knowledge was just his now, like Wikipedia in his brain. There had to be some upsides to the deal he'd made, Cora guessed.

She shut the door to her bedroom and drew the curtains closed, leaving her in the dark of the warm room. She sat cross-legged on her little pillow on the floor and lit the candle behind her obsidian mirror with a small flame from her hand. North California. A Magistrate camp keeping who knew how many people prisoner, for who knew what insignificant or imagined crimes. That sort of place was guaranteed to be a well of despair and bitterness, which would make it easier to hit on, if nothing else.

She let her eyes fall shut a moment, her hands on her knees as she took a slow, steadying breath, the only noise in the house the sound of her own slowing heartbeat in her ears. When she opened her eyes and let her soft gaze land on the center of the slick black surface of the mirror, the dark room sank deeper into nothingness behind her. Getting to this stage was easy now—the subtle state of abstraction where coherent thought left her, and there was only her intent.

Find them. Help them. They need us.

A dozen landscapes flashed across her vision, deserts and forests and widespread little towns. She skimmed over the blips she normally focused on, tiny tugs of desperation that led her to the people she needed to direct Nathan and Elton toward, and searched for something larger. Something deeper.

They need us.

Her attention snapped to a stop over a desert dotted with sparse growth, rows of beige, industrial tents nailed into the rock and surrounded by razor wire fencing. It was difficult to focus on, as though she was looking at it through a fog or through smeared glass—a magic barrier. She felt the sweltering heat of the stagnant air inside the tents, her nose filled with the smell of unwashed bodies and human waste, and she saw the people within, wasting away on cots of metal and canvas, the skin of their necks rubbed raw by metal collars. Men filled some of the tents, and women others, but

all were thinning and gaunt with exhaustion. Men in uniforms stalked the dirt lanes between the makeshift barracks with blackjacks in their hands, each of their right hands glinting with the silver rings of the Magistrate.

With her heart squeezed tight in her chest, Cora forced her awareness away, searching for anything nearby that might help her identify the place. She spotted a small airport surrounded by farmland, a church, a small sign—Newell. Newell.

Cora let herself pull back, her vision blurring as the light of the candle returned to her sight, and she leaned back on her hands to let the dizziness pass. She'd learned quickly that standing up too soon after scrying was a fast track to hitting the floor face first. When she felt confident she wouldn't fall, she smothered the candle and turned to crawl up into her bed, barely wrapping the blanket around herself before she fell into her usual post-seeking nap.

17

Nikita's extended stay suite on the outskirts of Boston had started to smell some time ago. He didn't notice it anymore. The grime on the bathtub had turned brown as the layers of blood dried, and a mass of dismembered meat still sat in the basin, waiting for the next trip he took to dispose of it. The woman strapped to the bed laid on the aging stains of sweat and vomit that marked the ones who came before her. A trickle of dried blood had formed under her nose, smeared by Nikita's fingers. Her face was stained with tears, and she bit into the leather gag between her teeth as she struggled to make her pleas heard. Nikita wasn't listening. He checked the treated straps keeping her in place and put a hand on her face to check the dilation of her eyes. Responsive. Alert.

He turned from her to pour the oil from a glass vial into his palm and rubbed it into his skin up to the elbow, then laid his hand on her forehead to leave a smear of the grassy-smelling vetiver mixture there. The air conditioner brought up goosebumps on his bare back as it kicked on, but he ignored it. He'd been keeping the room cold for weeks to help with the smell. He climbed onto the bed, kneeling between her spread thighs with his weight on his heels, and raised his hands over her.

“По моей воле, мора, разорвать галстук.”

The woman's back arched away from the mattress as a dry scream ripped from her throat. She twisted against her restraints, the oil hissing as it burned her skin, and Nikita only faintly grimaced at the heat sinking into his own flesh. His arms were scarred from his previous attempts, turned pink and veined by burn after burn, but he kept his eyes on the face of the woman below him. His whole body ached, but he pulled, willing the spirit to do his work for him as he repeated his incantation again and again. The oil staining the woman's forehead bubbled down to the bone, her skin marked with red that rose into a broad boil and hardened until the flesh cracked. Pale blue smoke seeped from the first break, and as the woman's torso shook, the abscess split, folding open like wet petals. The fat, hairy body of an insect freed itself from its prison, soft mottled brown wings twitching in the cool air. Its delicate antennae swiped over the broken flesh, tiny legs finding purchase in the seeping blood, and the dark eye spots in the skull marking its torso flashed a subtle blue as it flapped broad wings and took to the air above the woman's head.

Nikita reached forward and snatched the moth in his hand mid-flight. He let it struggle in his fingers for a moment before crushing it, releasing a line of smoke that drifted to the ceiling as the insect crumbled to dust in his palm. He bent over the woman, leaning his weight on one hand near her armpit and lifting her eyelids with the other. Her pupils had tightened to pinpricks, just like he wanted. He listened to her ragged breathing as they slowly widened, expanding to hide her iris completely.

He pulled back and put his bare feet on the carpet, retreating to the chair near the closed curtains and sitting down to wait. He let his tender hands lay heavy on the arms of the chair and sat back against the cushion, watching the uneven rise and fall of the woman's chest. He stayed that way for over an hour while she lay unconscious, watching and waiting.

When she finally gave a soft whimper and began to turn her head, he rose and unfastened the gag from her mouth. Panic struck her as her gaze landed on his face, and she shrieked and pulled her wrists against the straps holding them, but he silenced her by placing a firm hand over her mouth and lifting an ogham-carved stone from the nightstand in his fingers, holding it where she could see.

"You know what this is?" he asked, and the woman froze, wild eyes trained on the token held before her like grapes before Tantalus. She gave a faint, stiff nod, and Nikita pressed the stone into her palm, allowing her to

close her fingers over it. “So use it,” he said. He took a step back from the mattress and watched her with cold eyes. “Set yourself free.”

The woman clutched the token and shouted the word “saeraid” with all the loathing she could muster, but no magic followed. The stone stayed lifeless in her grip, even when she repeated the word, chanting it and begging until the spell word only fell out of her in sobs.

Nikita waited. He let her try, whimpering and weeping and fighting weakly against her bonds, until she gave up, shedding the last of her pained tears into her pillow before shutting her eyes in defeat. He checked his watch. Twenty minutes now. That was plenty. Much longer than last time. He put a hand on her chest, the silver of his ring warmed by her straining body.

“Indoing.”

The woman jerked once more, the mattress creaking under her weight, and then she went still, her heart crumpled inside her chest. The stone in her hand thumped softly to the floor, and Nikita bent to pick it up, turning it slowly in his fingers as he looked at her. He was close. He just needed to be able to do it without directly applying the oil to his target. If he could do that, then the bodies that had passed through his room for the last three months would have served their purpose. He would be able to take a witch’s magic from them as he pleased—at least for long enough to kill them.

At least for long enough to kill Nathaniel Moore.

18

Elton didn't hear from Cora again until late into the night, but she was able to give them a heading. The little town of Newell, according to Nathan's phone, was about three hours away, so they got a few hours of sleep and got back on the road before dawn. Cora had been justifiably upset on the phone—the camp she'd described was the sort of thing he would have liked to think died out decades ago. But little surprised Elton anymore. Not with the overwhelming atmosphere of terror and silence he and Nathan had encountered everywhere they'd been for the last three months. No one knew anything; witches had been going out their lives as normal, but almost in a single day, it was as if the Magistrate had simply become a ghost, and its Chasers boogeymen. Families were torn apart by men in black SUVs, and no one who disappeared had yet come back home.

The RV was too high-profile and unsteady to take into the desert beyond Newell itself, so they left it behind in the shade between a pair of warehouses on the outskirts of town and “borrowed” a pickup truck from one of the neighboring houses. Nathan was on edge beside him as they drove on the uneven roads into the hills.

“Remember that today we’re here to look,” Elton said. “We can’t cause any trouble we can’t contain.”

“I’ll look,” Nathan promised him. “And then I’ll burn the whole thing to the ground.”

“Steady,” Elton said. He glanced over at the dark, focused eyes of the man next to him. “I don’t like this any more than you do, but we don’t want to get any of these people killed. We have to be smart.”

Nathan snorted in irritation and flicked the butt of his cigarette out the open window, scanning the horizon rather than answering.

When they’d been driving for half an hour, Nathan reached out to put a hand on Elton’s arm and pointed toward a distant hill, where a faint shimmer caught the light of the rising sun like waves of a mirage.

“There,” he said. “The barrier.”

Elton turned the truck off the road and drove toward the subtle blue dome ahead. Before they got too close, he parked the truck, and they abandoned it in favor of closing in on foot. Nathan took his hand to keep them hidden while they approached at a jog, but even when they reached the barrier, they were still a good two hundred feet from the nearest tent. Nathan reached out a hand to touch the dome and sent a subtle ripple from the touch of his fingers.

“I can’t just break it,” he murmured. “Even if I did, they’d know we’re here right away. I wonder if—hold on.”

He released Elton’s hand and flattened both palms against the glimmering light of the barrier, a soft flow of whispers falling from his lips as he slowly drew them together. When his hands touched, a slim tear opened in the dome, and Nathan crouched low to the ground with his hands breaking up the iridescence, splitting open the seam all the way to the earth.

“Go,” he urged, and Elton slipped sideways through the tear, scanning the edges of the nearest tents to watch for guards while Nathan crawled past the barrier himself, removing his hands with a soft spark once he was through and allowing the dome to knit closed again.

The fence inside was easier—Nathan simply gripped Elton’s arm and whispered, “Tsiks,” and the next thing Elton knew, they were beyond the razor wire, pulled by a gust of heated air and dropped back to solid ground.

They crept toward the closest tent and glanced through one of the sun-warped plastic windows. It was just as Cora had said—rows of bunks filled the space inside, forced up against each other to leave only narrow rows for

walking, and filthy men laid or sat in each one, many of them with torn scraps of cloth tucked between their skin and the sharp edges of the metal around their necks.

“Dampening collars,” Nathan whispered. “That’s how they’re keeping them subdued. I haven’t seen them used in years.”

Elton did a quick count of the beds inside—more than fifty people were crammed into the stifling heat, and he could see three rows of tents on either side of them. Depending on how deep the rows went, there may be a thousand people held here, at least. That was too many for them to free on their own. If the Magistrate ran their camps anything like they ran their prisons, they were likely to maintain no less than a twelve-to-one ratio of prisoners to guards, which put the number of Chasers in the camp at maybe a hundred or more. Too much resistance, even for Nathan. As much as Elton’s blood boiled at the state of the people inside the tents, this visit had to be reconnaissance only. Even if they could kill that many Chasers between them, they had nowhere to hide a thousand people.

“We need more information,” he murmured back to Nathan.

“I know everything I need to.”

“Nathan.” Elton took the other man by the elbow to force his attention from the window. “We’ll get people killed. We need to find out what we’re dealing with and come back with a plan.”

Nathan sighed sharply through his nose and scowled across at the blond for a few beats, but then he nodded with his lips pressed into a thin line. “Fine. Information.”

He hesitated a moment longer before taking Elton’s offered hand and glamouring them back into invisibility. They searched the perimeter of the barrier, pausing to let Chasers pass by when they drew too near, and Elton counted five rows of seven, plus a pair of larger, longer tents facing a metal facility at the center of the camp. This was an actual building and seemed to have electricity, so it must have been the housing for the assigned Chasers. That put Elton’s estimate of the camp’s population closer to two thousand, assuming all of the tents were full. One side of the camp had been dug into a crude farm, and Chasers stood by at the ends of planted rows while men and women crouched in the dirt, tending thin sprouts of plants.

At the far end of the encampment, skirting the barrier itself, a row of unmarked graves had been dug into the hard earth. A man in a collar stood at the end with a shovel in his hands, forcing the blade through the dirt with

slow, deliberate shoves and keeping his eyes from the three bodies on the ground behind him. By the size of the piles of freshly-turned earth nearby, Elton guessed that all three were meant for the same hole.

They waited a few moments, watching the closest alleys between tents for any approaching Chasers, but this man seemed to have been left on his own to work, at least for now. Nathan led Elton closer to him and drew the man's attention with a quiet murmur.

"Don't yell," he said, making the prisoner jump and glance around himself in a panic. When Nathan let the glamour fall, the man almost dropped his shovel, scrambling to keep it upright and in both hands. "We're here to help," Nathan went on, and the man's eyes grew large.

"I know you," he whispered. "You're Nathaniel Moore, aren't you?"

"I am," he nodded, while Elton kept his eyes on their surroundings.

"Thank god," the prisoner half sobbed. "I've heard what you've done for people like us. Please—you have to get us out of here. People die every day. They barely give us anything to eat, and they make us grow agrimony for their damned ropes and cut the ogham into more rings for more Chasers. I'm not a criminal—they picked me up for 'anti-Magistrate activity' and wouldn't even tell me what that meant!" He reached a cut and dirty hand out to take Nathan by the arm. "Please," he begged. "They've taken our kids, too, but they're not here. Do you know where they've taken the kids?"

Nathan covered the man's hand with his own, a grim frown on his lips. "I'll find them," he promised. "But you've got to tell me everything you know."

The prisoner let out a shaky sigh and sent a nervous glance toward the tents. "There are Chasers everywhere," he whispered. "They came and got me in the middle of the night, put a bag on my head and bound me. They said I was being taken to trial, and they put me in a cage with I don't know how many others. They left us there for two days with only a little water, and when they took me out, they stood me in a room in front of men I couldn't even see because they'd put the bag back on my head, and someone told me they'd found restricted materials in my house. I had some plants that I knew were illegal, but I never used them to poison people! My dad has heart trouble, and I make him a tonic with foxglove to help it. They said I was guilty of stockpiling contraband for distribution, and they sent me here on a bus. I've been here for a month and a half."

“What have you heard?” Nathan pressed. “Do you know if there are other camps besides this one?”

“I don’t know for sure. People talk, and they say they knew people who were arrested with them but got on a different bus. If they’re not dead, they must have taken them somewhere.”

“Nathan,” Elton interrupted as a Chaser turned a distant corner, and the other man reached back to take his hand automatically. The prisoner glanced around him in a panic as they disappeared again, but Nathan reached out to put a firm hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll get you out,” he said. “All of you.”

The man gave a small nod and drew a shaky breath as he bent to dig the grave with redoubled effort, clearly hoping to avoid the wrath of the approaching Chaser.

Nathan half dragged Elton from the compound, pulling him through the alleys so quickly that he had to twist his body to avoid slamming into passing Chasers and not releasing him until they had reached the outer barrier. He didn’t speak as he opened the narrow gap in the dome for them to exit through, and once they were through and the barrier snapped shut again, he stalked a few paces from the iridescent wall and reached into his pocket to light a cigarette.

Elton watched him with concern knitting his brow. Nathan lit his cigarette between scowling lips and stood staring at the ground, the bangles on his wrist tinkling softly as he put a hand on his hip. Elton waited, hesitant to take his eyes off of the other man while he took a long, slow pull from his cigarette and held the smoke in his lungs. A quiet Nathan was an angry Nathan, and an angry Nathan was unpredictable to him even now.

“Tell me your plan, Elton,” he said at last in a breath of smoke. He took the cigarette from his lips and let his hand hang at his side without looking up at the blond. “Give me a plan before I turn right around and do it my way.”

“I don’t have one,” Elton admitted. “But your way is going to end up in a lot more death than you really want. You’re more of a Molotov than a tactical missile. Let’s call Cora and Thomas—they may have some ideas.”

The sound of an engine echoed over the hill, and both men turned to look as an unmarked truck pulled away from the distant barrier and left a trail of dust behind on its way toward the nearest road.

“Deliveries?” Elton said, and Nathan’s eyes narrowed as they followed the truck’s path.

“Let’s find out what they know.”

They raced back to their stolen truck and slung rock from the tires from turning so fast, the engine struggling to force the heavy vehicle through the dirt at the speed Elton demanded. Nathan rode in the bed of the truck, bracing himself against the lack of suspension bouncing him along the desert hills.

“Please wait until they get out of the town,” Elton muttered, but Nathan, for once, seemed to have the same plan. They followed the box truck south down the single road that led through Newell, and once the last silo had passed from view behind them and left them on a lonesome strip of highway, Elton felt the prickling of magic under his skin.

The truck ahead of them was blasted upwards by its rear tires, the back end crumpled as if by an unseen hand, and the whole vehicle flipped, sending a rain of sparks from the metal frame as it scraped sideways down the asphalt and spun to a grinding stop. Elton stopped the truck a fair distance away, and Nathan was on the ground and stalking toward the hissing wreckage by the time he even got out of the driver’s seat.

The passenger door of the truck ahead came open with an uncertain creak, and Nathan reached out a hand to the bleeding man who tried to crawl out. The man fell from the cab in a jerking motion, as if he’d been pulled, and Nathan beckoned him forward with a single curling finger, dragging him to skid through the dirt. The blood that ran from a cut in his forehead seemed to drain toward Nathan’s outstretched hand as Elton approached, pooling into a droplet on his sweating skin before landing with a soft pat on one of Nathan’s knuckles. The man grimaced from his held position kneeling at Nathan’s feet, his throat exposed by the forced upward tilt of his chin.

“Hello there,” Nathan purred, tilting his head. “Why don’t we skip the foreplay here, and you just tell me what you know about that prison you just left.”

“Fuck you,” the man on the ground said through a tight jaw, and Nathan softly sucked his teeth at him.

“Wrong. Frakti.”

The man’s arm made a wet crunch, and he screamed as the bones in his forearm gave way, his wrist going slack without their support. Nathan bent

toward him and lifted the other man's useless hand, sliding the silver ring free and turning it pensively in his palm with one fingertip.

"Try again."

Elton's gaze snapped to the smoking truck when movement caught his eye. He plucked a talisman from the folio in his pocket and released it, sending it to snake along the ground and underneath the truck's cabin. In another moment, a second scream sounded from the other side of the wreck. He left Nathan to his hostage and walked around the front of the truck to find the driver on the ground, clutching at the tattered and bloody skin of his legs where the paper had sliced through the tendons at his heels. He looked up at Elton with panic in his eyes and struggled to lift a shaking hand up to him, but before he could get a word out, Elton gave a soft snort, and the talisman coiled over the man's skin and sliced through the bones of his hand, leaving bloodied fingers in the dusty red mud by the side of the road. The metal of his fallen ring glinted weakly under the wet grime, and Elton knocked the bleeding digits away with the toe of one shoe.

"You're really going to prefer answering my questions to the alternative," Elton promised him.

"You'll kill me anyway," the driver spat, taking shallow breaths as he clutched his fingerless hand to his chest.

"Yes." A strangled cry came from where Nathan stood out of sight, and Elton lifted a hand toward the sound to illustrate his point. "But *I'll* kill you quickly."

The man glared up at the blond for a few breaths, then let out a sigh that turned into a pained cough. "All I know is that we make the deliveries every week from Sacramento."

"Delivering what?"

"Whatever they need, I guess—rations, water. We pick up the stuff they ship out and bring it back."

"Nothing else?"

He scowled. "I don't bring the people, if that's what you're asking."

"Who does?"

"Someone who's paid more than me."

"How many of these camps are there? How many people?"

"Shit," the man scoffed, wincing as the torn muscles in his legs shifted with the effort. "I don't know. Six, maybe? I heard they're building one up

in Canada somewhere—stick the really bad ones up in the snow to freeze to death.”

“Where are they? These six?”

The man grimaced through a pulse of pain before answering. “They don’t send out newsletters,” he ground out. “I think there’s one near the Mexican border. There’s one down in Colorado. I think I heard Georgia once, maybe?”

“And?”

“I don’t know!” he snapped. “Fuck, just—kill me already.” He was becoming quite pale, now—a great majority of his blood had drained into the dust, and his eyelids drooped. This man was just a driver. If they wanted better information, they were going to have to find someone higher up to ask.

Elton tilted his head, and the bloody talisman wrapped around the man’s hand shot upward, opening a wide slit in his throat that poured the remainder of his blood down the front of his shirt. He let out a last gurgle that splattered his lips with red and sank back against the side of the truck, his body going slack as Elton walked away.

Nathan’s captive didn’t seem to have any bones left intact, but he still had the strength to sob. Nathan looked up at the blond as he approached and spread a hand toward the broken human at his feet, not seeming bothered by the spots of blood that had made it to his shirt.

“My friend here says he knows where we might find a sympathetic Chaser ear. There may be one or two left who *don’t* deserve to be slit open.”

Elton frowned at the man on the ground, his body twitching as his injuries overwhelmed him and reduced his breath to shallow gasps.

“Finish it, if you have what you need,” he said.

“I do.” Nathan bent down with his hands on his knees to look into the man’s empty eyes. “Thank you ever so much for your help. Wouldn’t it have been easier to do this to start with?”

His victim only bubbled blood from his lips in response, so Nathan sighed and made a twirling gesture with one finger as he rose, turning the man’s head along with it and causing one more thick crack of bones. He flexed his fingers and cracked the joints with his other hand as he walked beside Elton back to their waiting truck.

“Not a wasted day after all,” he mused, and Elton hummed his soft agreement before climbing into the driver’s seat.

19

Cora couldn't fall asleep again after talking to Elton. She hadn't been able to see much inside the camp she'd found, but even if she hadn't known what she was looking at, the overwhelming sense of hopelessness that had flooded her would have been enough on its own to keep her awake. Internment camps. Even the phrase turned her stomach. Some of the members of the council were probably old enough to *remember* the last time people were thrown into camps—didn't they know better? She just hoped there was actually something Nathan and Elton would be able to do about it.

She made her way downstairs on bare feet and moved toward the study, hoping some dry reading would put her to sleep. She scratched at the side of her head and tried to smooth her hair down to no avail. The side she'd shaved months ago had since begin to grow out, and it was at such an awkward length that she was considering cutting the rest of it to match. Maybe she could go into town to have it cut properly. She stopped at the entry to the study, but when she put her hand on the door knob, she heard the creaking of the chair inside and knew she'd be intruding. Thomas never slept as much as she thought he should—it wasn't unusual for her to go to

the bathroom in the dead of night and still see the light coming from under the study door. She retreated a step, ready to stare at the ceiling in her room instead, but stopped when she heard Thomas's voice call her name from the other side of the door. She turned the knob and let herself inside, finding Thomas in his usual place in the armchair with a book open on his knee.

"I thought you were asleep," he said, looking up at her and keeping his place in the book with one finger as he closed it. "I wrapped up the dough you were making, but I don't know if it should be out this long."

"Damn, I forgot," she sighed. She dropped down onto the little loveseat near his chair. "I fell asleep because Elton called and asked me to find something. He said the Magistrate is keeping people in camps now."

Thomas's eyes narrowed. "What sort of camps?"

"The bad kind. I saw it. It looked...well, about like you'd expect a secret government prison camp to look, I guess. I told Elton where to find it, and he said they'd check it out, but...I can't exactly just snuggle up back in bed now."

Thomas looked down at the book in his lap, his thumb pensively brushing the leather cover. He didn't speak for a long time, so Cora shifted awkwardly on the cushion and leaned forward as if to leave, but the movement seemed to startle him back to the present.

"You don't have to go," he said, and she paused. "I wasn't sleeping regardless."

"What a strange and new experience for you," she teased, catching the hint of a smile that passed over his lips.

"Well, at least I'll be able to show you the ropes. This is called 'insomnia.'"

"It's not punishment for breaking one of the demon rules, is it? You said I didn't have to pray anymore! Should I have been praying?"

"You mean you haven't been? You'll have to move out."

"Damn; I knew there was a catch! Here I was thinking I could pay my way with baking bread and changing sheets forever."

"Oh no—you'll still need to send me the bread. You just can't live here."

"I'll just leave it wrapped in a little plaid towel in a basket on your doorstep every morning?"

"Preferably, yes. Ring the bell so I'll know to come get it while it's warm, but make sure you're gone before I open the door so I don't have to look at you."

She laughed, hiding her soft snort with the back of her hand, and she looked up to see him smiling at her. Just a little—not a real smile, like a normal person might have, but a kind of Thomas smile, that was faint but sometimes managed to touch his eyes. Her heart thumped uncomfortably in her chest, and she swallowed it down quickly. On a growing number of occasions, she'd found herself in an easy, friendly conversation with her strange housemate, trading teasing barbs or honest concerns, and on a smaller number of occasions—like this one—she had wondered if they'd actually been flirting, or if she was imagining it. She couldn't deny that she'd caught herself flirting with him, and she didn't even try anymore to convince herself that she wasn't nurturing an odd little crush on him despite Elton's repeated texts reminding her that pursuing anything but friendship with Thomas Proctor was ill-advised at best. He didn't even really recommend friendship. She could be happy enjoying a crush on someone whose company she enjoyed—but he did sometimes make it difficult to decide if he could see through her or not. Maybe, if she pushed just a little harder?

“Well, at least if I was staying in town I'd be able to let off some steam,” she sighed dramatically. “It's tough being locked up in this house except for grocery runs for three whole months.”

Thomas's eyebrows knit faintly. “We haven't heard from the Chasers since that one showed up here,” he said. “You could leave if you wanted to, as long as you were smart. Is there something you'd like to do in town?”

“No, you know, like...*let off some steam*? All I've got is my own two hands here, and it's weird knowing that you're probably not asleep at, like, any reasonable hour, ever.”

“What do your hands have—” He stopped short and stared pointedly down at his book, but Cora could see the flush in his cheeks. “Well, if you're...unoccupied—I mean—” He shut his eyes tightly for just long enough for her to hide her grimace of restrained laughter. “I mean, if you...if there are things you need to do, you're not a prisoner here.”

“Don't you ever...let off steam?”

“That is one of the rules,” he answered without raising his eyes to her. “You know that.”

“Yeah, but it's not like you've been constantly demon-ing your whole life, or even this whole three months.”

A soft, dry scoff escaped him. “Three months isn't long.”

Cora paused, and she squinted at him as she edged closer, leaning her weight on her hands at the edge of the loveseat cushion. “How long is a long time, then?”

“Cora—”

“Come on. I’m not going to make fun of you,” she promised. “Six months?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“A year?”

Thomas sighed, frowning at her without answering, so she inched her face a hint closer to peer at him more directly.

“Two years?”

He pressed his lips together for a moment, then exhaled softly through his nose as if in resignation. “Ten.”

She stared at him. “Ten...what...?”

“Ten years.”

“Ten *years*?!” she echoed, so loudly that he leaned back deeper in his seat to put more distance between them. “Jesus Christ, Thomas! No wonder you’re such a surly asshole!”

“I thought you weren’t going to make fun,” he reminded her, and she lifted her hands in apology, laughing as she fell against the back of the loveseat.

“I didn’t know you were going to say you haven’t been laid in ten *years*!”

“It’s part of the agreement not to...deal in impure things prior to rituals. Since I made my arrangement, it’s just been easier to...not.”

“And your girl didn’t complain about that?” Cora asked, and Thomas’s dark blue eyes cut sharply over to her.

“She was dead,” he said flatly. “So, no.”

Cora’s soul crumpled inside of her like a plastic bag. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine,” he said, and she almost believed him. She’d seen him on his own through the open door of the study or standing in the kitchen, his fingers idly working the silver and emerald engagement ring he still wore around his neck. He’d even mentioned Claire’s name once or twice in passing during their conversations, so Cora hadn’t imagined the subject of the woman to be completely off limits—but she couldn’t have picked a more awkward way to test it.

“I’ll...see you in the morning, I guess,” Cora said, pushing to her feet and heading for the door with quick steps.

She heard the creaking springs as Thomas rose from his chair. “Cora,” he said, hesitating when she actually paused and looked back at him. “It really is fine. Just...hard to talk about.”

“I get it,” she assured him. “I wasn’t trying to pry. I’ll leave your bread on the doorstep,” she added with a faint smile, imagining she could see a touch of relief on his face as she retreated back up the stairs to her bedroom.

Though it took Cora a long while to fall asleep with her brain keeping the last awkward minute of her conversation with Thomas on endless, painful loop, she did manage to get some rest. She wasn’t able to salvage her forgotten bread dough, though, so she had to start over when she got to the kitchen in the morning. She was rescued from Thomas’s uncomfortable entrance shortly after by a phone call from Nathan. She put the call on speakerphone while he explained what they’d found out, her heart sinking into her gut the more detail he gave.

“And that isn’t the only one?” she asked when he’d finished. “You said there are six?”

“We think so,” Elton’s voice answered. Both ends of the call must have been on speaker. “But we don’t know exactly where all of them are. We have contact information on a Chaser who may be willing to help.”

“A Chaser?” Thomas repeated. “You’re sure you want to risk it?”

“We don’t have a better lead right now.”

Cora sighed and leaned her elbows on the table to put her head in her hands. “But even if we know where all these camps are, what are we supposed to do about it? You said there were more than a thousand people just at the one you went to! It’s not even like we can just tell the cops or something when it’s the cops that are doing it!”

Thomas’s gaze was focused on the table, his fingers curled against the wood as he listened. “I may be able to help,” he said so softly Cora almost didn’t hear him. When she questioned him, he swallowed as though unsure he should repeat himself. “I might be able to do something,” he said more clearly. “But I’ll need to do some reading first. I’m not sure it would work.”

“Not sure what would work?” Nathan questioned over the phone line.

“I don’t want to say until I know more,” Thomas answered. He stood from the table and hesitated. “I need some time.”

As he left, Cora heard Nathan sighing on the other end of the call. “Well that’s helpful,” he said. “We’ll look into this Chaser, then, while Mr. Proctor does his studying. How are you, my love? Well rested and content otherwise?”

“I guess so. You haven’t sent us anyone in a week or two—is everything okay out there?”

“We picked off one of Elton’s villains in Portland. That took a bit of doing.”

“So everything’s fine, just busy murdering?”

“You know I’m living life to the fullest, my love.”

“Yeah, I bet you are.” She paused and mushed her cheek with the ball of her hand as she leaned on it. “I miss you guys.”

“I miss you, too. Though Elton is a beauty in his own way, it’s not quite the same as waking up to your smiling face. Your exuberance is sorely missed in the shadow of Elton’s constant pessimism.”

“I’m sure Elton has some things to say about rooming with you, too.” She smiled down at Nathan’s picture on her phone, taken from the back seat of whatever stolen car they’d happened to be in at the time, that teasing grin on his face as he hung one arm out the passenger side window. “I’m going to see if I can help Thomas. You guys be safe, okay? Let us know what happens with the Chaser.”

“Of course. Take care, my love.”

“Bye Elton!” she called a little louder, and she heard his more distant goodbye before Nathan ended the call.

Leaving her bread on the oven shelf to bake, she wiped her hands and searched upstairs for Thomas. She knocked on his bedroom door and found him cross-legged on the floor next to his bookcase. She stepped inside when he invited her and sat down beside him, scooting a bit closer to see the open book in his lap. The lettering was in Latin, the words making room for a round sigil similar to the kind she’d seen on the pendant she’d worn during the ritual, and at the top of the page, a sketch had been drawn in ink in the shape of a man with two sets of horns growing from his head, the thick body of a snake wrapped around his body from his extended arm all the way to the ground. The eyes were little more than rough smudges of black, but they gave her a chill anyway.

“What is it you think you can do?” she asked. “That’s so many people—and I’m sure Nathan already suggested just setting them all on fire or

something.”

“The Magistrate’s most effective weapon is secrecy,” he said. “Everyone is afraid because no one knows what’s happening. They don’t know how to stop it, or how to even protest, because they don’t know what to protest. There’s only suspicion. There’s no one to blame yet. And killing Chasers isn’t going to help that.”

“So, let the secret out? But how can we? You’ve told everyone you know about the Order, and I’m sure Nathan and Elton have been spreading the word, too.”

“We can’t rely on word of mouth. This Magistrate governs all of North America—that’s too wide an area to simply hope news gets around. But if we could make this known, these camps—” He frowned down at his book and gingerly touched the ink symbol. “If everyone were to be released at once, returned home...thousands of people, living proof of the Magistrate’s corruption—”

“Hold on. Release them?” She glanced from the page to his face with confusion furrowing her brow. “But with so many...”

“I...think I could do it. Well,” he said with a small half shrug, “I think I could get a demon to do it. It’s a technicality, but...” He shifted the book slightly on his knee so that she could see it better. “Andromalius.” He pointed to the words beside the drawn sigil and traced them with his finger as he read. “His Office is to bring back both a Thief, and the Goods which be stolen. The word they use for ‘goods’ here...it’s ambiguous enough that I may be able to convince the demon that it covers stolen people, too.”

Cora let out a soft exhale of disbelief. “And just...bring them back to where they were taken from?”

“I’m hoping. But this work isn’t going to be free.”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t the demon that I normally work with. And since I’ve already made an arrangement with that one, I don’t really have anything to offer this spirit.”

“Because they want souls?”

Thomas nodded. “I’d have to...give him someone else.”

Cora chewed her bottom lip. “Is that...a thing you can do? I mean, if it’s a matter of saving so many people, and stopping this crazy Order, is it something that...that I can—”

“No,” he said instantly, a little too loud, his hand frozen over hers as though he’d meant to touch it and stopped at the last moment. He seemed to catch himself with his face too close to her wide, startled eyes, and he straightened and put both hands purposely on the edges of his book. “No,” he said again. “This isn’t—you can’t. You know what you’d be giving up. What you’d be promising. No one else should ever do what I’ve done.”

“Okay,” she agreed softly, her gaze falling to the hand on her knee that he’d come too close to touching and her fingers curling against the fabric of her jeans. “Then what can we do?”

Thomas let out a slow sigh through his nose. “I can...use someone else. Not for the demon to make a deal with, but...as an offering.”

She frowned. “You mean a sacrifice.”

“More practically, yes.”

“A human sacrifice.”

“I’ve never done it before.” He flattened his hand over the worn page. “But the instructions are here. I *could* do it.”

Cora wet her lips and tucked them between her teeth for a few seconds before speaking again. “Thomas, that’s...”

“Elton has been killing people in droves for months,” he said quietly. “He could send one of them here, instead.”

“But *you’re* not a killer.”

He seemed to flinch from the words, eyes narrowing momentarily, but he kept his attention on his book. “I am whatever I need to be.”

“I don’t know. There has to be some other way.”

“Does there?” He looked up at her. “What if there isn’t? I can perform this ritual—I have the things I need, save an offering. If the demon agrees, then I can put an end to all of this at once.”

“Even freeing all these people won’t just stop the Magistrate, Thomas.”

“But if these thousands of people reappear with their loved ones, with stories of their treatment, telling what’s really happening? That’s something that people can rebel against. That’s something they can protest. It’s something they can fight.”

She hesitated, watching his eyes. She wasn’t convinced, but he looked at her with such conviction that she couldn’t find it in her to argue with him. “I guess...if you’re willing to do it, then I’ll help you how I can.”

“I won’t ask you to do anything you aren’t comfortable with, Cora. But...I appreciate it.”

Cora offered him a faint smile, then leaned a little closer to look down at his book in an effort to change the subject. "So I meant to ask...when I was in the cellar, you told me not to look past that disc."

"Yes."

"Do you look?"

"Yes," he answered more reluctantly. "But I'm used to it."

"These books have pictures, don't they? Of the demons? Can I see yours?"

"I wouldn't call it 'mine,' precisely," he said, but he turned the pages until he reached the one he wanted. Flattening it open with one palm, he turned it so that she could see and leaned his weight onto his hand on the floor, so close now that their shoulders almost touched. She recognized the sigil from the copper pendant, but her eyes were drawn to the sketch above—a man with a broad mouth filled with sharp teeth, the reins of a pale, thin horse in his hand and the head of a long snake extending from beneath his robe like a hissing tail. His skin was all filled in with black, and the eyes had been scratched in red.

"This is Bathin," Thomas said, and Cora frowned down at the drawing for a moment before turning to look into his face.

"Does it really look like that?"

"More or less. In person it's...a little hard to pin down. Demons are difficult to look at—I'm sure you felt the sickness they cause inside without even being in line of sight. I try not to stare."

"How did you...decide, I guess? On this one?"

"I didn't decide." Thomas's fingers moved on the page, skirting the image of the demon as though he didn't quite dare to touch it. "It decided on me. Long ago. When I was born, probably."

"What? Why?"

He took a slow breath, swallowing before answering. "My family. As far as I know, they've always done this. Generation after generation. The spirit claims us when we're young, and then when we come of age, we make our agreement. We're not a very long-lived family, as you can guess."

"That's crazy," Cora breathed. "But you said it's awful! Why would so many people do it?"

"Tradition," he shrugged. "Pressure from the ones older than you. And...some measure of inevitability."

"Inevitability? Why?"

Thomas hesitated. “Even when I was a kid, from about eight or nine, my father would take me into the chamber with him. I prayed, I washed, and I watched. The demon that claimed my father—I can show you the picture, but I promise you the reality is worse. It had the paws of a grey wolf, with the head of a great black bird and a beak filled with teeth like a dog’s. It spit fire and had a snake for a back end, and its voice...I’ll never get that sound out of my head. Like when a log breaks and falls in a fireplace. It scared me. I told myself I wouldn’t ever do what my father had done. But...as I got older, I started to have dreams, and then I would hear voices when I was alone. My father said it was the same with him. The demon was calling to me. And once I was an adult, and I’d seen what the Magistrate was capable of...the kind of magic the demon offered was hard to refuse.”

“That’s an old story, I guess,” Cora said. “I wouldn’t have pinned you as the kind of guy who was swayed by power, though. Nathan I get selling his soul to some creepy spirit, but you’re less high maintenance than he is.”

“Some things need a lot of power,” he murmured. He looked up at her and seemed to realize how close he was, quickly sitting up straighter and snapping the book shut. “I’ll do some more reading. Make sure I know all the steps.”

“You know Elton isn’t going to like this plan,” Cora said, and Thomas scoffed.

“Elton can—” He stopped, tapping his lips with one finger as though shushing himself, and he shook his head with a wry smile. “Elton can have whatever opinion he likes,” he said instead of the swear he was about to let slip.

Cora snorted. “I’m going to check on that bread,” she said, and she used Thomas’s shoulder to help push herself to her feet, not realizing the tension the simple gesture caused in him until she was already standing. “Sorry,” she said quickly, pulling her hand to her chest as though it had misbehaved.

He shook his head and focused on replacing his book on the shelf. “I won’t bite you,” he said softly.

The quiet reassurance brought a smile to her lips that she kept to herself as she shut the door to his room and slipped back downstairs.

20

The Chaser that Nathan's unfortunate victim had directed them to was in Sacramento, so they started the drive south soon after recovering their hidden RV. Nathan took a nap on one of the beds in the back, which would have been a welcome quiet for Elton if he hadn't known for certain it would lead to the other man bothering him late into the night when he then couldn't sleep. So he kept the windows open, turned up the radio, and banged the cabinet doors when he stopped for gas, eventually drawing Nathan squinting from the back room like some sort of cave-dwelling animal.

"Are we there yet?" he asked in a yawn as he dropped into the front seat, slouching while Elton pulled away from the gas station.

"Not yet. Do you know where we're going beyond 'Sacramento?'"

"Of course I do." Nathan spread his hands as if framing a marquee on the windshield. "Magistrate Station #3, Sacramento."

"Great. Just put that into the GPS."

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, darling; I keep telling you." Nathan propped his feet up on the dash and sighed. "How much longer?"

"Why don't you go read a book?"

“I’ve finished mine, and I hate yours. I got two chapters in and tossed it out the window, I was so bored.”

“You tossed—I wasn’t done with it!” Elton glared across the cabin at him, but he only shrugged.

“I did you a favor; I skipped to the end to read the last page, and it was that policeman’s sister the whole time.”

Elton returned his attention to the road with a long, weary sigh. “You are just the *worst* sort of person.”

“How many Magistrate stations do you think are in Sacramento? More than three?”

Elton didn’t answer him.

Without any friends in Sacramento to ask or any directions to the station, their only choice was to park the RV and search on foot. They left their wheeled home behind in a public parking lot and made their way toward the Capitol Mall at Elton’s suggestion. He had taken one of the spare Chaser rings Nathan kept in his kit as trophies, but he wasn’t willing to put it on his hand; he only kept one hand in his pocket and felt the metal warming against his skin.

“We’re looking for the *witch* government, darling,” Nathan said in a breath of smoke as they walked the sidewalk toward the roundabout park just in front of the capitol building. “Did you hurt your head when you hit it on the roof the other night?”

Elton spared him a sidelong glare as they crossed the street. “I wouldn’t have hit my head if I hadn’t woken up with you trying to get under my blanket.”

“Oregon is *cold*.”

“So you tuck the blanket under your feet like I told you—if you make a pocket, the warm air stays in, and—”

“I’m just not built for this sort of climate,” Nathan interrupted with a dramatic sigh, flicking the ash from his cigarette.

Elton bit the inside of his cheek and walked a little faster. When they reached the columned building adorned with statues of spear-bearing horsemen at each corner and gables filled with carved chiton-wearing women, Elton slowed his pace, letting Nathan trail behind him while he scanned the front of the building and craned his neck to peer around the edges of the steps.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Nathan called. “Are you hoping to find a map?”

“Yes,” Elton answered. He paused when he caught sight of a faint glint of blue at the side of one of the dark stone structures surrounding the trees on either side of the building’s entrance. He walked toward it without looking back to see if Nathan was following him or not, and once he reached the flat, shimmering surface of the stone, he touched it with his fingertips and sparked it to life. The light condensed and focused into pale blue lettering, contrasting the dark structure behind it.

North American Magistrate

Capitol Hill Station

2.5 miles East

“What’s this?” Nathan asked, waving his hand in the direction of the misty letters.

“How are you so old and there are still such basic things you don’t know? How do you think people find the Magistrate when they need it? Just about everywhere has one of these on mundane official buildings. They’re hidden from the mundanes, but witches can find them if they’re looking.”

“Well in my defense, I do normally try to avoid the Magistrate, rather than look for it,” Nathan chuckled.

Elton took the ring from his pocket and slipped it onto his right hand, then reached out to touch his knuckles to the floating phrase, scattering the light into particles again.

“Sluindid.”

The glimmer shifted back together into a longer list, with actual street addresses and telephone numbers for each numbered station.

“Aha,” Nathan said. “You do still have some Chaser magic in you, hm?”

“I do if it helps us find this person.” Elton scanned the list, then picked his phone from his pocket and put the address he needed into his map while Nathan took a quick photo. He dispersed the illuminated list with a touch of his hand and took the ring from his hand to put it away. “Come on. It isn’t far.”

He led the way along the route his phone gave him, glancing from street signs down to the screen at every intersection until he spotted the telltale starkness of a concrete building ahead of them.

“That looks about right,” Nathan said. “Shall I go in and ask around?”

“You really shall not. Who is it we’re looking for, anyway?”

“He said her name was Maya Reyes. Why? Are *you* going in to ask around?”

Elton frowned at him and turned to look back at the building. There would be no using glamours to get them inside—most Magistrate stations had barriers to prevent illusions as soon as you walked in the door. And without knowing what Reyes looked like, they couldn’t just wait around and hope to spot her leaving.

“We’ll need to—” he began, but he paused when he saw Nathan with his phone to his ear, lifting one finger to shush the blond.

“Yes, hello,” Nathan said cheerfully, “I’m looking for Maya Reyes. Do you know if she’s in? Oh, I’m a personal friend. We were supposed to meet for dinner, and I haven’t heard from her.” He paused. “Yes. Thank you ever so much.”

“What are you doing?” Elton hissed. “You can’t just call them!”

Nathan tucked the phone away from his mouth to answer. “They don’t know me by voice, you idiot.” When Elton started up again, Nathan turned his back on him to speak into the phone. “Hello, Ms. Reyes? Oh, good. You don’t actually know me, but I’m hoping you’d like to meet. I was given your name by a man who suggested you might be interested in discussing some current events with me. ...Yes, I know—but I think you’ll be glad for it if you make the time. Let me buy you dinner?” Nathan threw a smile over his shoulder at Elton. “Yes, of course. All right. I’ll meet you there. Thank you, Ms. Reyes. Looking forward to it. Bye now.” He hung up the phone and took a drag of his cigarette as he slid it back into his pocket.

“You know they record every call that comes in,” Elton pointed out.

“So what if they do? You killed a man on the highway this morning, and you’re concerned about a Chaser being caught having a dinner meeting? Please. I hope you don’t mind sushi for dinner—she suggested a place right around the corner.”

“Where all the Chasers at the station probably eat regularly,” Elton sighed, but Nathan waved him away.

“We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it.”

“Is that how that goes?”

Nathan only offered him a sly grin as he started down the street, so Elton reluctantly followed.

The restaurant was small inside, with only a few tables set apart from the counter seating, but they claimed a table large enough for three and sat

down to wait. Nathan sipped a beer while Elton drank only water, and they watched the doorway for anyone who looked like they might be named Maya Reyes. They didn't have to wait long—a woman in a pair of black Dickies and a soft buckskin leather jacket over her t-shirt walked in before Nathan had finished his beer. She was young—probably only in her mid-twenties, with dark, curly hair that was clipped short into a mess around her head, and both Nathan and Elton pinned her as a Chaser at a glance even before they saw the silver ring on her hand. Nathan lifted a hand to her and waved her over, but the woman froze in the entrance to the restaurant, brown eyes wide and lips pressed into a panicked line. Nathan beckoned her again, a smile on his face, and Reyes edged closer, approaching the table at a hesitant, sideways shuffle, as if she thought one or both of the men might literally explode at any moment.

“Ms. Reyes?” Nathan asked when she was finally close enough to speak to. She nodded but didn't answer, only lowering stiffly into the chair opposite them at Nathan's gesture.

“Am I going to die?” she finally whispered, and she almost jumped out of her skin at Nathan's sudden laughter.

“You see?” he said, nudging Elton's arm. “That's the sort of reaction I like. No, Ms. Reyes, you're not going to die. But you know who I am, then?”

She nodded, her tan skin looking a little paler. “I know who both of you are,” she answered in a strained voice as her nervous gaze flicked over to Elton.

“I wanted to talk to you because I was told that you may have leanings that differentiate you from the sort of man who gave me your name. Up near Newell?”

Reyes' jaw tightened, and she visibly swallowed. “So you know about it?”

“I don't know enough. That's why I thought, perhaps, you might be willing to speak to me.”

She glanced between the faces of the two men staring at her, her shoulders tight as her fingers gripped the edges of her chair's seat. “M...Mr. Moore, I, uh—”

“Nathan,” he corrected. “Please. This is Elton,” he added, tilting his head toward his companion. “May I call you Maya?”

“I—yes?” she said uncertainly, seeming a bit taken aback by his casual tone.

“Wonderful. What were you going to say, Maya?”

“I...don’t know,” she admitted, a nervous half-laugh escaping her. “You’re really not going to kill me?”

“Cross my heart,” Nathan chuckled. “If you are who I think you are, then we’re on the same side. I only came to talk today. And to eat, obviously. The sashimi is good here?”

The young woman’s shoulders relaxed slightly, and she allowed a small smile to show on her face. “It’s great.”

Once they had ordered their food and Reyes had downed a third of her beer in two gulps, she wiped at the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand, seemingly convinced that she wasn’t about to be murdered.

“So what do you mean about us being on the same side?” she asked with both hands loosely circling her glass. “You’re...kind of public enemy number one; you know that, right? I can’t believe I’m even talking to you.”

“I’m *Magistrate* enemy number one,” Nathan chuckled. “And they seem more than ever to be the real enemy of the public—not me.”

“You’re not wrong,” she murmured with her eyes on the faintly foamy surface of her beer. “I don’t know how we got here, but I know it isn’t right. Those—those camps,” she went on under her breath, leaning forward slightly to keep the conversation private, “they’re disgusting. I have to process the paperwork, and the number of names I see pass through...but what can I do about it? Who would listen if I said anything? I’d end up on a bus myself.”

“What you can do about it is tell *me* about it.” Nathan emptied his glass and set it aside. “They aren’t going to put me on a bus. But I need to know what I’m dealing with. I’ve seen the camp at Newell—do you know where the others are?”

“Well, sure. How does that help?”

“I need to know where they all are so that I make sure I don’t miss anyone.”

A thoughtful frown creased her brow, but she waited until the server had laid their food down in front of them and left again before voicing her concern. “Miss anyone? ...What is it exactly you’re planning to do?”

“Not sure yet,” Nathan shrugged, taking up his first piece of fish with his fingers rather than bothering with any utensils.

“We want to get everyone out of there,” Elton clarified. “We’ve been trying to put a stop to this Order of Repression since we found out about it.”

“Really?” Reyes looked between the frowning, stern blond with his arms folded and his jewelry-wearing companion tilting his head back to drop a chunk of raw tuna into his mouth, and the corner of her lips quirked into a faint smile. “*You guys* are the good guys?”

“I don’t know about that,” Elton admitted.

“We’re better than the ones keeping people in cages,” Nathan said once he’d swallowed his fish. “What do you say, Maya? Do you think you can help us?”

“I guess you didn’t treat me to dinner instead of murdering me for nothing. And...if anyone can do something about all this, it’s someone like you, right?”

“I can,” he promised, “and I intend to.” Nathan wiped his fingers on a napkin and edged his chair closer to her with a soft squeak of wood on tile, taking his phone from his pocket as he moved. He leaned quite close to her, letting his shoulder press against hers and tilting his head toward her so that she could see his screen. “If you’d let me know how to reach you, I can get hold of you whenever there’s something I want from you.”

Reyes hesitated, glancing from Nathan’s face down to his phone, but she slowly took it in her hands, her shoulders hunching slightly as she typed in her number. As soon as she handed it back to him, Nathan sent her a short message and smiled at her as the soft vibration sounded from her pocket.

“There,” he said. “Now you can tell me whatever you want from me, too.”

A red tinge flooded the tan skin of the young woman’s cheeks, but Nathan simply moved away from her to return to his plate while Elton stared at him. Reyes finished her food quickly, sparing few glances at either man and leaving half her beer un-drunk as she scooted her chair back from the table.

“I’ll...send you what I know,” she said. “And if there’s anything else I can do, you can ask,” she added with a small nod in Nathan’s direction. “I’ll help how I can.”

Nathan stood as the Chaser did and offered her his hand, which she looked at uncertainly for a moment before accepting.

“I’m sure I’ll have some ideas for you,” he said, releasing her when she retreated and watching her until she slipped out the front door before

dropping back into his seat beside Elton.

“You’re unbelievable.”

Nathan reached across the table to help himself to the rest of Reyes’ abandoned drink. “What?”

“She’s a Chaser.”

“So are you, darling.”

“She’s...I don’t even know how to do the math to find out what percentage of your age she is.”

“If I only dated in my age bracket, Elton, it would be pretty slim pickings, wouldn’t it?”

Elton sighed and let the subject drop, just shaking his head and trying to pretend he was anywhere else while he finished his meal.

Back in their parked RV, Nathan lounged on his twin mattress with one knee raised and the other leg dangling over the side of the bed, reading a book he’d stolen when he’d demanded they stop along the way. His phone chimed on the table beside him, and when he leaned to look at it, he smiled and called to Elton, who sat purposely away from him at the tiny dining table.

“She’s sent me a list,” he said. He set his book down flat on the sheet and sat up to check the message. “Your man was right; there are six camps. I have addresses, delivery schedules, staff assignments, population—what a helpful young woman.”

“Planning to thank her with more inappropriate flirting?”

“If you’re not careful, darling, I’ll catch on that you’re jealous.”

Elton only half-listened while Nathan called to give Cora an update, but when a long pause was followed by Nathan’s “What, really?” and then a low, mischievous laugh, he turned to look suspiciously over his shoulder.

“Elton, you’re going to want to hear this.”

The blond left his tea behind and sat on his own bed across from Nathan, whose grin he distrusted immediately. “What?”

“Mr. Proctor wants us to bring him a sacrifice victim,” Nathan said with his hand covering the receiver. “Isn’t that neat?”

“*What?*”

“A live and wriggling one.”

“Give me the phone.” Nathan handed it over, and Elton did his best to make his disapproval audible as he demanded, “Put Thomas on.”

“Don’t yell at him,” Cora said, but Elton made no promises during the pause as the phone changed hands.

“Yes?” Thomas answered.

“What kind of sacrifice?”

“The kind that doesn’t make anyone any deader than when you throw them out a window. But the kind that *will* free those people from their prisons.”

“You mean a demon will do it. Thomas, that’s insane—bad enough that you use that thing for all the magic you do already, but—”

“I know what I’m doing. Summoning is only dangerous when people don’t do it right. Demons like rules. If you follow the rules, so do they. You do remember rules, don’t you, Elton?”

Elton scowled at the floor, turning his back to Nathan and lowering his voice. “This isn’t about you and me, Thomas.”

“Then don’t make it about us. You do a lot of killing these days—when it’s time, just *don’t* kill someone, and send them to me, instead. I can do the rest.”

“Just like that?”

“As far as you’re concerned, yes. Just like that. I can do it, but I need time. A spell like this is going to take a lot of preparation. Weeks.”

“Weeks? While those people just sit in those camps and die?”

“They’ll be just as dead waiting for you to come up with a better plan,” Thomas snapped back. “I’ll do this no matter what. You get to choose to whom. Will you send someone or not?”

Elton ran weary knuckles over the creases formed between his eyes, squeezing his eyes shut in a grimace. “Fine,” he said at last. “When it’s time, tell me what you need. We’ll do what we can here.”

“Good,” Thomas said, and Elton heard some soft scraping through the speaker before Cora took over the call again.

“Hey, nobody yelled, yay,” she said in mock excitement.

“Cora,” Elton sighed without opening his eyes, “please don’t do anything stupid. And...try not to let Thomas do anything too stupid either, okay?”

“Well, I’ll do my best, but stupid ideas seem to be kind of how all four of us operate, you know?”

He gave a soft scoffing chuckle despite himself. “Yeah. I know.”

21

Thomas had spent the day hidden away either in his bedroom or the cellar, and when Cora had happened to spot him traveling from one to the other, he'd always had at least one book in his hand, sometimes a notebook and pen. Now that he'd spoken to Elton and confirmed that a victim would be coming his way, he sat on the study floor with papers and books spread out on the low table in front of the loveseat while Cora set down cups of coffee for both of them.

"That's a lot of stuff you've got there," she said as she settled into the chair nearby. "Looks intense."

"Some of the objects I'll need are...hard to come by. When the book itself refers to them as 'hideous and scarcely attainable,' it suggests you can't get them at the grocery store. I'll have to see how many favors I have left with some people back home."

"Anything I can help with?"

Thomas let out a dry chuckle. "Well, one of the things I need is the horns of a goat—*cum quo puella conciibuerit*," he read from a heavy leatherbound book, and he looked up at her. "That means one that's had sex with a woman."

“Uh, that’s a no from me. I’m more of a ‘let me grind up those herbs for you’ kind of gal.” She took a sip of her coffee as he bent back over the aging tome. “Where are you supposed to get something like that anyway? Is there a specialty shop for bestiality witchcraft somewhere?”

“Not that I know of. When I’ve needed things of similar scarcity before, they’ve had to be specially prepared. Back in Vancouver, if it was just animals, I would sometimes have the means to do it myself, but sometimes...” He shook his head and turned a page in his notebook, which was now filled with diagrams and line after line of notes in his small handwriting. “I don’t know where to get the skull of someone who’s killed one of his parents without having to answer more questions than I’d like. So I ask brokers.”

“Isn’t that kind of stuff illegal? Like, Magistrate prohibited black market items? You sure you want to get into all that?” She paused when he glanced at her with one eyebrow ticked, and she laughed. “I’m joking.”

“I wondered.”

“Is there anything *normal* that you need? That I can actually help with?”

“There are a fair number of herbs I’ll need. Vervain, which is common enough. I’ll need to make some incense—you can do that if you like. Camphor, aloe, ambergris, and storax.” He narrowed his eyes at the list in his book. “Mm. Mixed with the blood of a few various animals. I’ll do that part.”

“You’re so considerate.”

“I’m surprised you’re willing to help at all. It’s going to be...messy.”

“I don’t *like* violence,” she said softly. “But it’s not like I don’t know how the world is. If you doing this means that we can save those thousands of people and get them back to their families, and the person you’re killing for it is someone that Elton picked as deserving it, then...” She shrugged. “It’s not ideal. But I sure don’t have a peaceful solution, and I trust you both. It’s better than Nathan just blowing things up until he gets what he wants.”

“Also not ideal.”

Thomas returned his attention to his book, and they sat together in the quiet room. Cora watched him over her coffee mug with her feet tucked up under her in the chair. The longer they spent together, the more she found herself noticing things about him—the pleasant slenderness of his hands as he scratched notes onto his papers, or the way his hair would fall into his

eyes while he was reading, so he would lean his elbow on the table and keep it pushed out of his face with his fingers, forehead resting on the ball of his hand. Just like now.

She felt like a sap—or maybe just a dumb kid. But this warm feeling in her stomach wasn't like the way she'd blushed and panicked when she'd first started this journey. Elton had been handsome and broad-shouldered and well-dressed and new, and he'd been one of the first people other than Nathan to actually have a kind word to say to her. To her mind, back then, that was enough. This was different. Thomas wasn't bad looking, but she wouldn't call him *handsome*—he was skinny, and he always had bags under his eyes and a little stubble on his jaw, and he wore the same thin, slouchy black cardigan just about every day. He was sullen and quiet, and he used a startling amount of animal blood for his magic, but she'd begun to see through him. Everything that he did came from a place of care and kindness; even when he occasionally snapped at her or scolded her, it was because he was trying to show her how to do something better, or because she was about to hurt herself. He was the sort of person who would work himself to death if it would help a single someone who needed him.

Herman hopped lightly up onto the loveseat beside his head, and Thomas reached back automatically to scratch the small cat behind the ear, allowing him to rub his whiskered face over his knuckles without taking his eyes from the page. Cora smiled, and she set down her coffee and slid from her chair to take a seat on the floor beside Thomas, which finally distracted him enough that he looked over at her.

"Make sure you give me a list," she said. "I'll handle the herb gathering and incense-making." She leaned a little closer to him, her knee and shoulder touching his as she peered down at his notes. "Is there anything else?"

He tensed next to her but didn't pull away. "I'll need a small cloth, actually—woven by a woman. I don't suppose you know how?"

"Not even a little bit. But that's what YouTube is for, right?"

"There's actually a small hand loom in the attic, I think, if you're willing to try."

"I'll give it a shot," she said. "It would be pretty rude of me to be watching you wash things in goat blood or whatever and to say weaving some fabric is too much to ask." She smiled up at him, hoping her face didn't give away the little flutter it made in her chest to sit so close to him.

“Thank you,” he answered softly, but she couldn’t read the look in his eyes.

He seemed on the verge of fleeing from her, but when she focused back on the table spread with books, he did the same, incrementally relaxing beside her the longer they sat together. After a while, she decided to push her luck, and she exaggerated her yawn and laid her head against his shoulder, letting her eyes drift shut as she settled into the warm space he made in front of the loveseat. She waited for him to get up and let her fall, or to nudge her awake, but he didn’t. He stayed so still and turned his pages so quietly that she really did drift off, listening to the sound of his breathing under her cheek and Herman’s rumbling purr behind her.

Cora woke up under a blanket on the loveseat with a pillow tucked under her head and Herman snoozing in the nook behind her knees, and she stayed there for a long while, pulling the blanket up tighter under her chin and watching the specks of dust floating in the strip of light coming through the curtains. Maybe she wasn’t imagining as much as she thought.

For the next few days, Cora spent her time studying the list Nathan had sent her, closing herself in her bedroom and gazing into her mirror so that she could take down every detail she could about each camp. They were much easier to find now that she knew where to look, so she could take her time, examining the layouts and the state of the prisoners. She didn’t know how much it would help, but she passed everything new on to Nathan as she learned it, in case he decided to storm one of them before it was time despite all warnings to the contrary. Waiting around wasn’t exactly something he was known for.

She watched videos about weaving, which very slowly began to make sense to her, and she climbed the ladder to the attic to pull the heavy cloth off of the promised loom, which instantly made all the information she’d learned seem useless. She went into Salem proper to find the herbs she would need to make the incense. The woman who owned the witch shop, whose name she had learned was Anne, was always friendly with her now; she was eager to help point her toward things she wasn’t familiar with and tell her the details and uses of items she’d never seen. Cora liked her a lot—she was exceptionally knowledgeable and seemed to enjoy sharing what she knew. She’d even been the one to give Cora the bread recipe she used regularly now and taught her the trick to kneading it properly.

With a bag full of herbs, resins, gum arabic, and charcoal, as well as a set of bone and shell charms so that she could try out some osteomancy, she stopped on her way out the door and turned back to ask over her shoulder, “You don’t know anything about weaving, do you?”

“Weaving cloth? A little.” Anne tilted her head at the younger woman, her eyes narrowing slightly, and she beckoned her back over to the counter so she could speak in a softer voice as she leaned her arms on it. “He’s having you weave cloth for him?”

“He asked,” Cora shrugged. “He’s...planning something big, and he needs a lot of stuff.”

“What kind of something big?”

Cora hesitated, glancing down at her bag. “I think...probably better if I don’t say. But it’s to help everyone. Things are getting way worse,” she added softly. “My friends who are out traveling say it’s bad.” Cora had confided in the woman what she knew about the Magistrate’s Order but neglected to mention that the friends she occasionally talked about were actually the two most wanted men in the country right now. Anne hadn’t seemed overly concerned at hearing the details of the Order; she said that the Magister in Boston was notoriously lax, given the area’s history. It was to the city of Salem’s benefit for it to maintain its witchy reputation, so things were allowed to go on that may have been considered a breach of secrecy in other parts of the country. Cora just hoped that continued as far as protecting people like Anne, who kept demon-summoning equipment for sale upstairs, from being thrown on a bus and taken to a camp.

“Just be careful,” Anne said. “I know you’ve said he’s one of the good guys, but that isn’t the story I’ve always heard about that family. And his kind of something big isn’t likely to be bloodless.”

“If they were so terrible, why do you have that stuff? When we first came here, you guys both acted like you were it—you’re the supplier to go to.”

The woman smiled faintly. “My family’s been in Salem for a long time, too.” She straightened and gestured to the door. “If you go out to the left, there’s a shop called Stitches’ Circle. Talk to Katherine; she’ll get you what you need to get weaving.”

“Cool. Thanks, Anne.”

“Let me know how the bone-throwing goes,” she called as the bell over the shop door signaled the young woman’s leaving.

22

Nathan was getting restless. When Nathan got restless, he got annoying. RV parks were clustered and privacy-lacking by nature, and Nathan had been making friends at every stop since they'd started their trip. He was usually satisfied to entertain himself—he would share drinks with a neighbor or yell at Elton to come out and help make s'mores over a campfire, but they'd been in Sacramento for a few days now without even the benefit of surrounding woods for the distraction of tree-climbing and skinny dipping. Even the blessedly quiet night he'd spent away from the RV, apparently at the apartment of a certain doe-eyed Chaser, hadn't stopped him from complaining.

"I want to *do* something," he said for about the hundredth time, sprawled on the bench near their dining table while Elton sat on the bed with a book. His cheek pressed into the vinyl cushion as he traced the burned marks in the floor with one idle finger. "Cora hasn't given us a lead in days. What is she doing? Do you think Mr. Proctor finally put her in his murder cellar?"

Elton pressed his lips into a line without answering. Per Cora's request, he hadn't said anything to Nathan about her questionable crush or any of the panic-charged texts he'd received in the weeks since. He'd just

repeatedly reassured her that she wasn't crazy or stupid, but that Thomas was troubled at best, and he wasn't the sort of project she should consider taking on. She'd seemed to accept his advice, but Elton knew that if he said anything at this point, Nathan was likely to scold them both for keeping secrets, and he just wouldn't be able to bear that hypocritical conversation.

"Why do you hate him so much?" Elton asked instead. "You give him endless shit, and he's only ever tried to help us."

"I don't *hate* him," Nathan scoffed. He turned over on his stomach and lifted his chin into one hand. "You have to care about someone to hate them."

"You sure tease him a lot for someone you don't care about."

"Well, I wouldn't want him to feel left out."

Elton shook his head and tried to get back to his book, but a moment later, he jumped as Nathan appeared silently at his side.

"I want to do something," he said again, and Elton sighed and folded the corner of the page to keep his place. "Let's do something."

"Like what? We've already found the man we're going to send to Thomas, but there's no sense in going after him until it's time. Cora, as you said, hasn't given us any leads. We could do with a little down time, if only to cool our trail. Do you want to just wander the streets looking for good deeds to do?"

"Well, I wasn't thinking of *good* deeds, precisely—"

"Your kind of bad deeds get the attention of the Magistrate as well as the mundane police, and that's not what we need right now."

"Then what about some neutral deeds? Heaven forbid some fun ones?" He sat at the edge of Elton's mattress, forcing him to scoot closer to the wall. "When was the last time you had *fun*, darling?"

Elton snorted. "You have enough fun for the both of us."

"Nonsense. Come on. Give me a hint. What does Elton Willis do for fun? Something has to put a smile on that face on occasion."

"Maybe silence? Haven't had that in a while."

"Perhaps we should find you a new serial killer to obsess over. I'll buy you a cork board and some pins and string."

"Funny."

"Something has to get that blood pumping, darling, other than vigilantism and murder. What did you do for fun as a child?"

Elton stared flatly at him. “When I was a child, it was a good day if I had a full stomach and didn’t get any new bruises. I worked.”

“Poor thing,” Nathan said, so sincerely that it made the blond uncomfortable. “Even someone like me had a childhood.” He leaned back on his hands. “When I was small, I had a thing called a whirligig. You’ve probably seen them—just a bit of flat wood, or sometimes a large button, and when you wound it up with the strings and got it spinning, it made a loud buzzing noise.”

“Irritating people since birth, huh?”

Nathan stared at him. “No one ever taught you not to open your mouth if you don’t have anything nice to say, did they?” He sat up and took the book from Elton’s hands, setting it aside on the table between the beds. “We’re going to find something that makes you happy, Elton. I want to see a smile on you that isn’t cynical. Things are bleak enough—and we’re lucky to have some time to spare. Let’s use it.”

“Nathan, I don’t—”

“Hush now. My suggestions clearly don’t align with your sensibilities, so you’ll have to help. We’ve been blessed with healthy bodies, magic at our command, and a free afternoon. Let’s spend the time, not just pass it. Tell me what *you* want to do.”

Elton sighed. He didn’t want to tell Nathan the truth—that the only “fun” he’d had when he was younger came in the form of smoking in parking lots, collecting cash from street fights he’d helped organize or from restaurants his older brothers were “protecting,” spending nights in smoky bars playing poker or—he paused.

“I used to play a lot of pool,” he said, and Nathan brightened. He slapped Elton on the knee and hopped to his feet.

“Then let’s play pool. I won’t even cheat, and I’m terrible at it, so you ought to enjoy yourself.”

It didn’t take much searching to find directions to a pool hall. The building was low, long, and windowless, and the inside was just like the places Elton remembered—dim and lit with red, with a dirty bar along one wall and a long row of pool tables filling the space opposite. A “No Smoking” sign had been nailed to a post at the end of the bar, but it was spotted with defacing burn marks, and a cloud of smoke floated just under the ceiling, fed by trails from half a dozen cigarettes in ashtrays at the edges of tables.

“Will this do?” Nathan asked, and Elton found himself faintly smiling. He couldn’t count how many nights he’d spent in a hall like this one, drinking beer he was too young to have and smoking cigarettes he’d been given by older men, betting a little money with Li Jie and the other boys his age. Elton had gotten good enough that they could sometimes hustle strangers and split that money, too. As strange as it was, it might have been the only time that he’d really felt like a kid. He’d been free and on his own, with cash in his pocket and the thought of the filthy apartment waiting for him far from his mind.

“Yeah,” he said. “This will do.”

Nathan, as it turned out, *was* actually pretty awful at pool. Either that, or he was pretending for Elton’s sake, but the blond caught the frowning and irritated teeth sucking that suggested otherwise. Elton had rolled his sleeves up in the warm room, and his beer dripped condensate on the thin carpet with every drink he took. His shoulders relaxed for what felt like the first time in months as he held his cigarette in the corner of his mouth and bent over the table, lining up his shot with the weight of the cool, lacquered wood in the space between his thumb and forefinger. Once or twice, Nathan bumped the back of Elton’s cue with his own as he was trying to shoot, resulting in a trail of scraped chalk on the green felt surface of the table, but once they were three beers in, Elton only laid his forehead on the edge of the table with his stick still in position, and he laughed.

“I think you’re cheating,” Nathan said, tapping the ash from his cigarette into the closest tray. “Hiding a grounding in your cheek?”

Elton scoffed out a chuckle as he rose. “Why should I need to cheat? You’ve sunk more of my balls by accident than you have your own on purpose. What are we, five games to nothing?”

Nathan held his cue in both hands and leaned on it to watch the other man. “I’m glad to see you like this, darling. It’s almost like you have a real personality.”

“Fuck off,” Elton said, reaching for his beer to take another drink.

“I mean it. Everything I’ve learned about you has led me to believe that you’ve done nothing but run yourself ragged from the age of twelve onward. You’ve certainly only been focused on the task at hand as long as I’ve known you. A man can’t live like that—not for very long, anyway.”

“I’ve made it all the way to thirty-five,” Elton countered, pointing an argumentative finger at the other man from around his glass.

Nathan smiled at him and bent to take his own shot. “You know, I’ve been thinking about what you said on the way to Mexico City. About proving your worth.” He struck the cue ball, but the second ball he managed to hit bounced harmlessly away from his target pocket. He sighed and straightened again to take a drink from his own glass. “I’d like to hear more about that.”

“Why? I’ve had too much to drink to do quid pro quo.”

“Oh, you don’t need any more answers from me, darling. I’m one of the oldest stories there is—a young man given everything throws it all away for the sake of adventure, then spends the rest of his life getting into trouble and hating the government. I’m only interesting because of my body count, that’s all.”

Elton hesitated, lowering his cue stick back to the floor. “I don’t think that’s true. You’re—” He stopped, then focused his attention on the table and bent over it with a frown. “You’re Nathaniel Moore,” he said once he wasn’t looking the other man in the face. “You’re the most powerful witch in the Magistrate’s record, and the Magistrate keeps very good records.” He snapped his chosen ball into the pocket and circled the table to line up his next shot, pushing his hair back into place with a rake of his fingers. “You could do anything with the kind of magic you have, and instead you use it to steal things and set fires. At least, that’s what I thought when I met you. But that’s not true at all.”

“Oh?” Nathan watched the blond sink another striped ball.

“Well. You do steal things and set fires. And you act like that’s all you care about, but you wouldn’t still be here with me if you weren’t interested in making things better. You wouldn’t have spent three months living in an RV and hunting down fugitives to rescue if all you really cared about was yourself. You want the Magistrate to protect people like it should and stop coming between families. You care because it’s happened to you and you don’t want it to happen to anyone else. And I think it’s an act that you say you don’t like people knowing your name without being afraid of you,” he added as he lowered his stick to the table again, but this time the ball hit the corner of the pocket and ricocheted off course.

“You’re onto me,” Nathan chuckled. “My innermost secrets exposed.”

“You’ve got too many people who care about you for you to be a complete asshole.”

“Is that so?” Nathan took a drag from his cigarette and exhaled the smoke away from the table. “And you, darling? Shall I count you in that precious number?”

Elton frowned into his beer and swallowed another mouthful.

“You said I was your friend,” Nathan pressed, a teasing grin on his lips. “Am I your best friend, Elton?”

He snorted as he set down his glass. “Best out of what, two?”

“So that’s a yes.”

Elton sighed. “Yes, Nathan, you’re my best friend out of both my two friends. Take your shot.”

“You changed the subject,” Nathan said, moving to the end of the table so that he could aim properly. He was letting the topic drop, but Elton could see the satisfied smirk on his face. “Shall I do you, then, since you’ve seen through me so well?”

“Do me what?”

“I think that you fell into criminal trouble because it was better than the alternative. Absent father?”

Elton only shrugged, but Nathan took it as confirmation.

“And your mother—drugs, or liquor? My guess is drugs, since you’re so adamantly opposed. Am I right?”

“Sure.” Elton put out his dying cigarette and leaned over to accept Nathan’s wordless offer to light him another.

“And I assume she had a revolving door of shitty boyfriends, or maybe just one really awful one?”

“Bingo,” Elton answered around his cigarette. “See? I’m not so complicated, either.”

“But I am interested in your talk about worth,” Nathan said. He leaned his hip against the side of the table and looked up at the blond rather than continuing the game. “You’ve spent a lot of time being told you’re worthless, haven’t you? By your mother, by boyfriends, by reg police or by Chasers, by your instructors at the Academy, possibly even by superiors at your home office. You wanted to prove them all wrong.”

“I told you that,” Elton said, hiding his frown by turning his head to exhale smoke.

“But what changed, then, when you came to my apartment in Yuma? When you agreed to hunt the lich with me and then didn’t bother to bring me in at all? I think I know.”

“I don’t like this anymore. Are you going to play?”

“In a moment, darling; in a moment.” Nathan hopped up to sit on the edge of the pool table, holding his cue stick in both hands in front of him and tilting his head up at Elton. “I think that you’d built up so much of me in your head, this nefarious witch on the run whom only you could ever subdue, that you just knew was the best that ever was—that when you met me, and I judged you as the man I saw before me and treated you as such, as a talented and keen-minded witch implacable and determined enough to ruin your life looking for me...” Nathan shrugged and gave a soft laugh. “I hope you realize you’ve never had to prove your worth to me.”

Elton stared at the floor rather than look into the dark eyes that watched him. “Yes,” he said at last, but he still couldn’t bring himself to look up. “I know that.”

“Good,” Nathan said cheerfully, and he slid from the table and turned to aim his shot. “I’m glad we at last understand each other, darling.”

Elton leaned against the hightop table holding their drinks and watched Nathan roll the cue ball almost directly into the left side pocket without even touching any of the other balls, and he allowed himself a soft smile.

23

Thomas emerged from the cellar to a quiet house, which was unusual. He could almost always hear Cora wherever she was—humming in the kitchen, heel tapping against the end of the loveseat as she swung it while she read—but now he couldn't hear anything. He paused in the living room, listening, and then a dull thump and a voice that might have been cursing sounded from above him, and he snorted. He turned the corner to find the attic ladder drawn down, so he climbed it enough to see in and scanned the shallow room until he spotted her on a pillow scavenged from her bed, leaning over the aged hand loom to pick free a mistake she'd made.

"Cora?" he called, and she jumped with a soft shriek.

"Jesus," she laughed. "I'm gonna put a bell on you."

"It's late. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. I wanted to at least get this stupid thing as wide as my hand before I stopped, but I've only made it as far as my middle finger. Which, coincidentally, is the one I want to use most while trying to work this stupid thing."

"I could get the cloth from somewhere else, if it's too much trouble."

"Oh no—I'm doing it, now. Now it's personal. This thing's tasted my blood; I'm not letting it off easy."

“Then I’ll make something to eat. I’ll have to start fasting soon, so I thought it might be nice to have a good meal first.”

Cora looked over her shoulder at him. “You want me to help?”

“I’ll manage. You work on getting that cloth to narrow gauze length.”

“Shut up,” she grumbled, but she had a smile on her face as she returned her focus to her work.

Thomas left her to her weaving attempts and made his way to the kitchen. He gathered up the ingredients he’d bought with this meal in mind and set about chopping vegetables, enjoying the rhythmic sound of his knife on the cutting board. Cora had been different these past few days. She would get closer to him than she ever had before; she sometimes casually touched him, and she sat beside him on the loveseat in the evenings rather than remaining in her own chair. When she’d fallen asleep against him in the study, it had taken everything in him not to panic. He wasn’t used to having people around at all—not for more than a day or two when he had couples in transit, anyway—and having a young woman in the house who seemed to be growing steadily more comfortable with him was another level of invasion entirely.

He set the meat and vegetables to cooking in the fireplace, passing a sliver of spare chicken on to a begging Herman, and cleaned his knife to slice the fruit that would serve as the only dessert he was capable of making. He heard Cora come down the attic stairs, so he expected it when she entered the room, but he didn’t expect her to approach him and press her cheek into his shoulder on the pretense of examining his progress.

“It’ll be a little while yet,” he said, not daring to turn his head to look at her. Her face would be entirely too near to his, and she would look up at him with a smile in her dark eyes. This was too close. People made things complicated—and a kind, vibrant witch whose only purpose seemed to be to insert herself into his affairs was even worse.

“Anything I can help with?”

“No thank you,” he said briskly, and she took his hint and retreated to the kitchen table. He finished his work and focused his attention on wiping down the counter rather than the woman who he knew was watching him.

“Thomas,” she said when it became clear he’d wiped the same spot two or three times, and he stopped. He didn’t like the way his name sounded on her lips—it made his stomach hurt. “Can I...ask you a question? You don’t have to answer it if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to answer it,” he said immediately, earning himself a balled-up cloth napkin chucked at his face, which he managed to catch at his chest before it hit the floor.

“At least listen to what it is first!”

Thomas sighed lightly and sat down across from her at the table. “What is it?”

She pulled her lips between her teeth for a moment as though hesitant to ask. “I just wondered about...what you said about the demon. About inevitability.”

A frown twitched the corners of his mouth. “What about it?”

“You said that you didn’t want to do the same thing your family had done. But you did it anyway.” Her brow furrowed, and she leaned onto the table to get just a little closer to him. “Because of the Magistrate? But why? Was...was it after Claire?”

Thomas appreciated that she found Claire’s name difficult to say. He did, too.

“It...was,” he answered, lacing his hands together on the table and looking down at them so that he didn’t have to see Cora’s pitying eyes. He took a slow breath and shook his head. He didn’t have to tell her anything. He didn’t have to answer her—she’d said it herself. But it might be nice to tell the truth to one other person on Earth. And then she would put her distance between them again.

“I wasn’t...entirely honest with you back in Toronto. When I told you what happened to her.” He paused and glanced up at Cora, but she was only listening with a soft, pensive frown. “She did receive the ingnas, and she did respond badly. I found her at her aunt’s house, bedridden and blank. She didn’t know me. She didn’t know anyone. She couldn’t speak at all—she only stared, at the ceiling, or at the television. Her aunt was kind enough to let me visit her, but...there was no point. So I asked to take her home with me. I said that maybe I could fix what they’d done to her.”

Cora stayed silent and waiting, giving him the time he needed to swallow the tension growing in his throat.

“I gathered what I needed, and...I summoned Bathin for the first time. I bound myself to it, gave it everything I had and promised it more, if it would help me. It promised me the knowledge you’ve seen—the herbs and stones. But it also promised me that it would restore what the Magistrate

had taken from Claire. So I signed the agreement in blood. And the demon kept its part of the bargain.”

“But,” Cora started softly, confusion creasing the space between her brows, “I thought you said that she—”

“She got everything back,” Thomas went on. He could hear the thickness in his own voice as the truth fell out of him at last. “But there was so much she’d lost—all of her memories, her thoughts, her dreams, her laughter, her...everything that made her what she was. When it all came back at once, she—she couldn’t take it. She was...screaming. She was sobbing, and when I tried to help her, she still didn’t know me. She shouted at me and threw things, and she attacked me. Nothing that I said or did—”

Thomas’s hands clenched tighter on the table in front of him. He could still hear Claire’s screams as if she were in the room with him now. He felt the scratches on his face and arms as she clawed at him hard enough to draw blood, kicking and hitting him with the fury of a frightened wild animal. He didn’t have any of his supplies back then. He didn’t have the means to stop her by magic—he hadn’t thought he would need to. If he’d been more prepared—but he’d had to defend himself.

“I...there wasn’t anything I could do to help her,” he said.

He felt her thrashing body underneath him, bloodied hands tearing and pulling at his arms in desperation as he held her by the throat, his own breath coming in heaving sobs, his tears not enough to blind him to the sight of her reddening, panicked face. Her pale eyes, once smiling and gentle, now looked empty and frenzied as she fought for her life against the man she’d intended to marry. Her fingertips held his sleeves until they no longer had the strength, and the last sound she’d made was the strained, breathless whisper of his name. Then her arms fell heavily to the floor as she went slack beneath him. He’d touched her face, looked into her staring eyes, and curled over her, clutching her head to his chest and burying his face in her hair to cry.

“I had to kill her,” he said, barely able to breathe well enough to get the words out. “I wish I’d just given her a tincture, like I told you. It...it would have been kinder.”

“Thomas,” Cora whispered, and she moved from her place to sit beside him and cover his hands with hers. “Thomas, you did more for her than anyone could have ever asked of you.”

“It wasn’t enough.”

“That isn’t your fault,” she assured him, her fingers gripping his hands tightly. “I shouldn’t have asked. I’m sorry I brought all this up.”

“It’s fine,” he said, though he was sure he didn’t sound convincing. He stared down at their joined hands, Cora’s thumb gently brushing over his knuckles. “I’m actually...glad to tell someone else. I’ve never...said it out loud before.”

She smiled faintly at him and moved one hand to give his wrist a comforting squeeze. “Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me.”

“Well,” he said with a soft chuckle, “I don’t suppose you’re in much of a position to turn me in. But...thank you for listening.” He checked his watch as a pretense for removing his hands from hers and stood to check the food on the fire, but he could feel her eyes on his back as he crouched in front of the pot. She hadn’t put more distance between them at all—she’d closed the gap. She’d held his hand and tried to comfort him. The thought constricted his chest, but if he was honest, his burden felt a little lighter now that he’d shared some of the load.

Cora’s heart ached while she helped set up the dinner table. She’d felt sorry for Thomas before, but what he’d described was far worse than she’d imagined. He’d been through so much, given up so much, and come out the other side still wanting to help people. She didn’t pity him now—it made her feel a little silly to admit, but she admired him. Cora couldn’t be sure she would have done anything but curl up in a ball and wait to die after something like that happening to her.

She also hadn’t been able to shake the warm feeling that had formed in her stomach when she’d had her hands on his and he’d shown her a hint of a smile. She couldn’t deny enjoying the way he tensed up and stared at the slightest flirting—she guessed ten years without sexual contact was more than long enough to make someone a bit twitchy. While they ate, he asked her about what she’d seen in her mirror, if she needed any help with the incense, and if the weaving was getting any easier—he didn’t seem to want to linger on the subject of their earlier conversation, and she couldn’t blame him. She was happy to chat with him about the present before their present turned gruesome.

Dessert was a large pile of fresh strawberries, cherries, melon, and blackberries, which Cora attacked in a very unladylike way. Thomas was only a little more restrained—it must have made a nice change from the

bread and gruel he'd been mostly surviving on while they had a steady stream of house guests. He actually seemed close to something like content, which was a welcome change. If Thomas was about to have to go back to his fasting, bloody, no-impure-thoughts life, then Cora guessed now was as good a time as any to test her limits.

"Are there any more cherries?" she asked, tilting her head to peer at the dwindling mound of fruit.

"Here," Thomas answered, and he picked one from the far side of the plate and offered it to her. She leaned over to him and took the cherry from his fingers with her mouth, drawing it past her lips with her tongue and smiling at him in thanks as she settled back into her seat. Thomas sat frozen, his hand still extended as if to offer the fruit that was already gone, for so long that Cora almost laughed. Then he cleared his throat and rose from the table, busying himself with cleaning up the remnants of their meal with his back pointedly toward her.

"Sorry," she offered, knowing she sounded as insincere as she felt.

"It's...fine."

Cora leaned her elbow on the table and put her chin in her hand to watch him. "Wanna see me tie the stem in a knot?"

"I—no," he said without turning around. "I believe you." He filled the coffee pot with water from the sink and took the can of coffee from the cabinet. "Do you want coffee? I think I want to...leave. To be in the study, I mean. There are—I need to study the incantations. In the...study," he finished, and she could see the faint grimace on his face even in profile as he popped the lid of the can.

"You know, I never thought of shy guys as my type, but you're really cute when you're flustered."

Thomas's grip faltered, and the metal can hit the corner of the counter and spread a dramatic arc of coffee grounds through the air as it tumbled to the floor. Thomas scrambled after it and scooped it up before it could roll too far away, holding it tight in both hands and placing it firmly back on the counter. Cora bit back her laugh and stood to grab the broom from the corner of the kitchen, and she laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"Why don't you go ahead? I'll bring some coffee when it's done."

"Cora, I—you—"

"Relax," she chuckled. "You cooked, so I'll clean. I'll get down on all fours and scrub if I have to. You can stay and watch, if you want."

Thomas pressed his lips tightly together, hesitated just a moment with his gaze flicking to the spilled coffee grounds, and then he turned and exited the room in a few quick steps, leaving Cora to softly laugh as she swept.

By the time she brought the pair of coffee cups to the study, Thomas was settled on the loveseat with a book open on his lap, one elbow leaned against the armrest and lips moving silently as he read the incantations he would need to know by heart for the coming ritual. He didn't look up as Cora took a seat beside him and set down a mug for him, but she thought she saw his subtle frown deepen slightly.

"Thank you," he said. His fingers tightened on the edge of his book as she inched closer to him on the loveseat. She pulled her feet up onto the cushion and leaned over to rest her chin on his shoulder, arms looped around her knees.

"That looks long. You have to memorize the whole thing?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to, like, read it dramatically at me or something? I've heard that helps."

"I'd rather not say these words out loud until I need them."

Cora looked up into his face, though he refused to meet her gaze. "Well, if you get tired of staring at it, we can think of something else to do. I told you it's been a long few months here."

Thomas shut his eyes and exhaled a sigh through his nose. "Cora, please, I—can you—"

She laughed and sat up straighter. "I'm sorry," she said as he finally turned to face her. "I'm bad at this. But it really is cute how upset you get."

"Bad at what? Making me uncomfortable? Being so—" He stopped himself and ran a weary hand over his mouth before letting it drop back to the arm of the loveseat.

"I'm sorry," she said again. She shifted on the seat to face him properly and glanced down at her hands in her lap. "What I'm bad at is...being honest? About real stuff. It's easier to make jokes, you know? But what I want to say, I guess, is that...I like you. I worry about everything you've been through, and this ritual you're going to do, and what it's going to mean for everyone once it's done. I'm here to help you, but I want you to know that...I'm here for *you*, too."

Thomas watched her for a few seconds without answering, and then he let out a soft sigh and leaned forward to set his book on the table. "Cora, my

life is...what it is. I'm just doing what I can with the time I've got. I don't want your sympathy, and I don't want you to stay here because you think I'm too pathetic to be alone. I've been on my own for ten years, and—"

"That's not it at all," she interrupted. Cora reached out to take his hands in hers and give them a gentle squeeze. "I know you've been doing it alone. I sure as hell couldn't. And I don't think you're pathetic. I think you're brave. What I'm trying to say is that I'm not just here because of the Magistrate anymore. I care about you, Thomas, and I guess...this stupid crap is the only way I know how to show it. I'm sorry if I've been irritating or made you uncomfortable. Well—too uncomfortable. A little is fine."

Thomas frowned down at their hands, his shoulders seeming to ease slightly. "Cora," he sighed, the sound of her name so softly twisting a knot into her stomach. "I don't know how to have people care about me," he added with a faint, dry smile as he finally met her eyes. "I'm...glad that you're here. I'd gotten so used to just being exhausted all the time, that having your help has been...a relief. I do care about you, too."

Cora smiled at him, a touch of unwelcome heat rising in her cheeks as Thomas's fingers tightened almost imperceptibly around hers. Without fully intending to, she closed the distance between them and kissed him. His stubble scraped her chin, and she moved one hand to touch the fabric of his sleeve. His usual tension softened against her, his hand fastening loosely around her wrist, and when she pulled back from him, she caught her bottom lip in her teeth and watched his dark blue eyes as they refocused on her. She wasn't sure what reaction to expect from him, but there was a definite hitch in his breath as his fingers tightened on her wrist. He stared at her with lips parted as if to speak, a faint crease in his brow above eyes that seemed to suffer so much it made her own heart hurt. Before she even thought to say anything, he stood, releasing her and pulling back as though she might burn him, and then he turned and left the room without looking back. She heard his footsteps all the way up the stairs, ending with the sound of his bedroom door swinging shut and locking.

She stared out at the empty hallway for a while, then down at Thomas's abandoned coffee, bemused. That...had not gone at all the way she'd hoped.

24

Elton had made the executive decision to leave Sacramento the morning after their night out; the last thing he needed was Nathan deciding that they were on some kind of vacation together. He called Thomas first thing and asked for an estimate, but that was still no more certain than “two more weeks.” Elton didn’t want to sit around anymore. That was plenty of time to finish their visit to Elton’s target in Los Angeles, so he started up the RV and headed toward the interstate while Nathan still slept. Almost as soon as he got going, however, his phone rang again. He glanced down at the screen long enough to see Cora’s name before answering.

“Hello?”

“Elton, I need help,” she said. “About Thomas.” She sounded hushed and slightly muffled. Elton pictured her hiding underneath her blanket to keep from being heard. “Is Nathan there?”

“He’s sleeping.”

“Okay,” she said in a puffing exhale, “so here’s the thing. So Thomas has been really nice lately, right? We’ve been getting along, like, really well. And when I hit on him a little bit, he seemed nervous? But, you know, good nervous. He’s lonely and shy, right? So I thought it was fine. But then

last night, we were sitting together and talking, and I told him that I cared about him and I thought he knew what I meant because he said he cared about me too but I guess not because then I kissed him and he just—he just left! Like straight up stood up and walked out of the room and didn't say anything! I haven't seen him yet this morning because I'm afraid to leave my room and make it weird but *he's* the one who made it weird, right? I mean, who does that? Who just walks away from a kiss without a word? So what do I do?"

Elton stared at the road ahead of him while the girl carried on, a deep frown on his face. This was not the sort of call he had ever hoped to receive. He waited so long to answer that she called his name in a demanding voice, so he cleared his throat and forced himself to speak. "Why...did you do that at all? I told you what a bad idea it was."

"I couldn't help it! He was being so honest, and we were holding hands, and...it just seemed like the right time! But what if he starts avoiding me again now, and should I apologize even though I'm not really sorry I did it, and just why is he so *weird*?"

She sighed into the receiver, and Elton shook his head.

"I'm really not the person you should be asking about this kind of thing."

"I don't have anyone else to ask, Elton!"

"Then maybe if it's going so poorly, you just shouldn't do it?" he suggested, but she huffed at him in irritation.

"You just think he's too broken, and that's not fair. He's been through a lot, but he's still a person. And when he actually forgets to be sad for a minute, and I can see the person that he was before you ruined his life—which you absolutely did, by the way—he's so kind, and funny, and...I really like him, Elton. Like, really really."

Elton took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, his gaze falling to the rubber stress toy he'd tucked onto the dashboard months ago and still occasionally used when his close quarters with Nathan got to be too much. "I don't know what advice to give you," he said, more quietly. "Even when we were in school, Thomas was...skittish." He hesitated to go on, but he didn't want another earful. "If you really think this is the right thing to do, then just...be yourself. If he's having cozy talks and holding hands with you, you're doing something right."

Cora was quiet for a while, but when she spoke again, Elton could hear the faint smile in her voice. “Okay. I’ll do my best. Thanks, mom,” she added with a soft laugh.

“But just to be clear, you know he’s almost twice your age.”

“Don’t worry; I know how to make him feel young again.”

Elton grimaced and pulled the phone away from his ear for a moment, exhaling sharply through his nose. “Goodbye, Cora,” he said loudly, not waiting for a response before ending the call and dropping his phone back to the center console.

“What was that about?” Nathan asked just behind his ear, startling him so badly he struggled to keep the RV in his lane.

“Nothing,” Elton answered automatically. “Just asking about some breath work I’d mentioned.”

Nathan stared at him, eyes narrowed and lips slightly pursed. “Mhm,” he hummed, but he slid into the passenger seat without further probing. “So where are we off to now?”

Elton glanced sidelong at him. “Up for checking one more name off the list while we wait?”

Cora sat on her bed with the blanket folded over her head like a veil, staring down at the phone in her lap. With her lips pressed tightly together, she puffed a sigh out through her nose and flung the blanket away, planting her feet on the floor and making for the hallway. She went downstairs in her pajamas and spotted Thomas halfway into the cellar already, but she took him by the back of his shirt to make him pause.

“Cora,” he said, whirling and dropping the cellar door with a thunk as though he’d been caught. “I—spoke to some friends in BC, and they’re shipping the more difficult things that I need, so I should be—”

“I’m not sorry,” she cut him off, and he stopped. “I’m not sorry I kissed you.” She looked up at him, doing her best not to fidget as she released his shirt. “If you’re uncomfortable, or you’re just not interested, then that’s fine, and you can say that. I’ll put my big girl panties on and get over it. But if you’re *not* not interested, then...I’d like to kiss you more. A lot more.”

A subtle flush spread across Thomas’s cheeks and down his neck, and Cora saw his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. He looked down at the floor and rubbed a worrying hand across the short hair at the back of his

neck, a few sounds falling out of him that might have been mistaken for the beginnings of words before he managed to make a coherent one.

“Cora, I—I don’t do this sort of thing, and that’s by design. I...it’s no secret that I haven’t gotten over Claire’s death, and my situation now besides—it’s—complicated,” he finished, still not moving look at her. “You’re...you’ve been very kind to me, and I appreciate your help with everything, but I...personally, I...” He finally lifted his eyes to her face and let his hand drop back to his side. “Personally—I want that, too, and it frightens me. There are a hundred reasons why I shouldn’t, and I can’t think of a single reason I should that makes any sense except that...that I want to. And *want* just isn’t something that I get to—”

She interrupted him by pulling him down by the front of his shirt and making the decision for him. He made a soft, startled noise against her lips, but she kept him close by snaking her arms around his neck, and he gingerly responded in kind, placing slow, hesitant hands on her sides. She held the kiss long enough for his heart rate to slow from panicked to mildly alarmed, and when she pulled back this time, she didn’t let him go.

“I’m not asking you for anything,” she said softly. “You don’t need to be over Claire or change the way that you are. I like the way that you are. This doesn’t have to be complicated,” she assured him with a smile. “I’m already here. I’m going to keep on helping you with all the magic stuff. I just...want to be closer, I guess. If you want to.”

Thomas seemed to hesitate, glancing between her eyes like one of them might have a better answer than the other. “I’m not sure I remember how to be close to someone.”

She chuckled and stood on the balls of her feet to kiss his cheek. “I’ll help you remember,” she murmured close to his ear, enjoying the faint gape on his face as she finally released him. “So, your friends in BC?”

“Uh. Oh. Yes. Yes,” he repeated, turning back toward the cellar and bending to lift the door again. “They should have the items I need here within two weeks. Can you have the cloth and incense ready?”

“Easy.”

“Good. We’ll be on schedule. I’ll begin, then.” He put one foot on the cellar steps, then paused and looked back at her. “I don’t suppose...you know how to make black bread?”

“I barely know how to make bread bread. But if Anne knows, I can know.”

“I’d appreciate it. That’s all I’ll be eating until the ritual. Well—I’ll take care of the other, anyway,” he added quickly with a glance down the steps. “Thank you, Cora. I’ll..need to go into town a bit later, if you wanted to wait and go together.”

Warmth bubbled up in her at the timid way he peeked at her, like he couldn’t quite make himself meet her eyes. “Sure,” she agreed, and he hesitated a moment longer, then hurried down the stairs and beyond the floor that smoothed as soon as he let the door drop.

Down in the cellar, Thomas stood at his work table with both hands flat against the wood surface, leaning his weight into his palms and frowning. What was he thinking? Cora was so much younger than him, and so passionate and spirited—he shouldn’t consider doing anything that would bring her closer to a life like his. Closer to *him*, he corrected himself. They were in the middle of a crisis with the Magistrate, he was about to have to sacrifice a living human being, and the girl’s closest friends were on some kind of murder spree field trip—oh, and they were his old school roommate and Nathaniel Moore.

Thomas bent over the table to lean on his elbows and put his face in his hands. People complicated things. Cora complicated things even more. But the way his heart had begun to race from the simplest of her touches, the heat under his skin when she smiled—when was the last time he’d responded that way?

I’ll help you remember.

He rubbed his palms vigorously over his cheeks, the motion vibrating his long groan as he rose. It was not the time for this sort of thing. It would never be the time for this sort of thing—not for him. He couldn’t draw anyone else into this life. He certainly wouldn’t do it to someone like Cora. And he couldn’t afford to get distracted now that he had this ritual to prepare for. No matter how soft her lips had been.

Thomas gave one last huff, hoping to clear his head, and he tried to focus his attention on etching the correct markings into the candlesticks and vessel he would need for the ritual.

By the time he emerged from the cellar, he had almost managed to convince himself that he’d blown the whole thing out of proportion, that he’d allowed himself to imagine more than had actually happened, and that he would be able to tell her in no uncertain terms that they needed to keep

their distance from each other and remain cordial and no more. But when he pushed open the cellar door and saw her standing in the living room, her hair parted to hide the side still growing out and the strands of blue and black pulled into a messy bun at the back of her head, dressed for summer and smiling at him like she'd just been waiting to see him again, his stomach dropped. He wasn't going to tell her any such thing.

They collected the ingredients he still needed at Anne's shop, thanked her for the black bread recipe, and took a detour into the grocery. Cora eyed him suspiciously during his conversation with the butcher, but she managed to hold her questions until they had walked out of the store.

"Soo, *why* are you carrying a Tupperware of blood right now?"

"It's one of the requirements," he answered simply. "In the time leading up to the ritual."

"To do what with?"

He hesitated. "Well, to...to eat."

She stopped walking, and he made it a few steps ahead of her before noticing. "To *eat*?" she echoed.

"It's not as bad as it sounds. But it does have to be fresh every day."

Cora couldn't hide her disgust, and she didn't try. "That's fucking gross, Thomas. You're gross. Your magic is gross."

"I know," he answered as she began walking beside him again. He started as she slid her arm through his, locking elbows with him while they walked to meet their car.

"I once saw Nathan smear the inside of a gris gris with pulped up human heart and a mixture of his own semen and a stranger's vaginal juices, so I guess gross is just how the best magic is, huh?"

Thomas looked down at her in confusion, but she only smiled and hugged his arm a little closer.

"So do you just, like, dunk your bread in that like olive oil, or what?"

"I've only done this once before. I'm allowed to season it, but not with salt—not that it needs any more—and I can mix it with black beans, so that's what I did. Last time, I tried having it raw, and cooking it on its own, and baking it into the bread itself, but...those were all pretty terrible."

"Wow. That's amazing. It's like everything you said just piled onto itself and became more and more disgusting the longer you talked."

Thomas let a quiet laugh escape him, and he found himself reluctant to let the girl beside him pull away when they had to climb into the car. That

wasn't good.

The first two nights, Cora had audibly gagged and left the room during Thomas's sole permitted after-dusk meal, which he had to admit was a reasonable reaction. Now, she sat adjacent to him at the kitchen table with her cheek leaned into her fist, watching him with eyes narrowed in morbid fascination.

"This sort of shit is why you're so skinny, you know."

Thomas glanced sidelong at her while he chewed, but he didn't reply.

"What does it taste like?" she asked, craning forward slightly to peer into his bowl.

"Bitter," he answered once he had swallowed. "And a bit coppery. It's blood—I'm sure you've put a cut in your mouth before."

"Yeah, but I've never served it with beans," she chuckled. "Is the bread okay, at least?"

"It's more than okay. Thank you."

She smiled, and he stared down at his meal to avoid looking at her face. Her smile had become hard to look at over the past couple of days—it hurt his stomach. And she'd taken to putting a hand on his shoulder and kissing his cheek when she left the room, which didn't make things any easier. The night before in the study, she had picked up his empty cup for him, announced that she was going to bed, and then bent over him on the loveseat, her hand warm on his cheek as she left a lingering kiss on his lips. He'd watched her go without being able to form a thought coherent enough to answer the cheerful "good night" she threw over her shoulder. He'd struggled to get any sleep even more than usual.

"Well, when this is done and you don't have to fast anymore, we can go get you, like, an entire box of donuts or something."

He snorted softly. "I actually hate sweets."

"What? Who *hates* sweets?"

Thomas didn't look up at her. "Claire owned a small bakery back in Vancouver. When I first met her, I went every day—made some excuse or another, just to see her. She always had some new experiment for me to try, and I didn't have the heart to tell her I didn't like them. I put on ten pounds in the first couple of months we dated," he said with a faint smile. "So I wasn't fond of sweets before, but now I really don't want them ever again."

“That’s adorable.” Cora sat up a little straighter and propped her chin on her knuckles instead. “She sounds like she was a really great person.”

“She was.” Thomas took another bite and swallowed it down, barely grimacing anymore. “She didn’t deserve what happened to her. None of them do.”

“Well, that’s why you’re eating blood beans, right? So we can try to stop that kind of thing. We can at least help a lot of people. I just wish there was more I could do.”

“You do plenty,” he assured her. “You’ve located dozens of people for us over the last months. Any lives saved is more than most people can say they’ve done.”

“Thanks, Thomas,” she said quietly, and he finally looked over at her. “It’s hard to remember my part here when I’m around people like you, and Nathan, and Elton—you’re all so talented, and I think about how long it took Nathan to teach me even to levitate a glass of water,” she finished with a chuckle.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit. You started later than any of us. And your scrying—Moore can’t do that. Neither can I. All I do is make bad decisions that end with me having to eat blood for dinner.”

Cora snorted out a laugh that made his heart constrict uncomfortably. “I do have ‘not having to eat blood for dinner’ going for me.” She watched him for a moment, then put her hands on the table and pushed up to standing. “I’m going to have a shower.” She let her hand trace his back from one shoulder to the other as she passed behind him, pausing to bend and touch a kiss to his cheek before making her way up the stairs.

She was beginning to make the “no impure thoughts” part of his restrictions increasingly difficult—which was a new and unpleasant complication for him.

Thomas finished his unsatisfying meal and cleaned up the kitchen, then took his turn in the shower, brushed his teeth thoroughly to get the metal taste out of his mouth, and settled in his bedroom to recite his required prayers. If he stayed upstairs and didn’t go to the study, his day would be easier. He wouldn’t have to pretend to read while Cora sat beside him, her head on his shoulder or her back pressed against his arm so that she could curl up with her own book on her half of the loveseat. And he wouldn’t have to hold his breath every time she shifted. Maybe he should go back to the way things had been when she’d first decided to stay—just keep locked

in his room or in the cellar and limit contact with her as much as possible. That had been much easier.

He had determined to do just that when he heard a soft knocking on his door. He opened it to find a pajama-clad Cora in the hallway, smiling up at him.

“I didn’t figure you were sleeping yet,” she said. “Can I talk to you about something?”

Thomas took a step back to let her in, though his instinct was to urge her into the hallway instead. She crossed the room, fingertips skimming the spines of his books, and she lingered near his nightstand to speak.

“I wanted to ask you about this ritual,” she said. “About...what you need to do. With the person Elton is bringing.”

Thomas frowned, hesitant to get any closer to her. “Yes?”

“Are you okay with it? With killing someone as an offering like that, knowing what’s going to happen to them?”

He glanced at the floor with a subtle shrug. “It’s the best plan I have.”

“That’s not really what I asked.” She moved toward him and took him by the hand, urging him to sit beside her on the edge of his mattress. “I guess I just...wanted to make sure you knew that just because you *can* do this, it doesn’t mean you have to. And just because Nathan and Elton have given up on being good people, it doesn’t mean you have to do that, either.”

“Cora, I’m...doing this because it’s the right thing. I think it’s the right thing. If this one person’s death can put a stop to what the Magistrate is doing, if there’s even a chance, then I’d rather do it than keep waiting around and hoping that some other person Elton murders is going to be the one to end it.”

Cora’s expression softened, and she pulled his hands into her lap and squeezed them tightly. “It’s still a lot to ask of you.”

“No one asked it of me,” he corrected her gently. “I offered. And I’m willing. I can do what needs to be done. What’s the worst that’s going to happen to me?” he added with a dry chuckle. “My soul is in about the worst place it can be already.”

“Thomas,” she sighed, scooting closer to him so that she could press a plaintive hand to his chest. Her touch felt hot even through the fabric of his shirt, and he looked down at her hand and back up into her eyes uncertainly. Suddenly the fact that she was here, in his room, sitting beside him on his bed, was a very important detail that wouldn’t have mattered a week ago. “I

don't want to be the only one worrying about you, okay? Worry about yourself a little, too."

"I—" he started, then paused, taking a moment to swallow the quickening heartbeat threatening to creep up his throat. She needed to go. "I'm really fine. I'm not going to enjoy it, but I can get it done. Don't worry about me."

"I do anyway," she said with a soft smile. He felt her fingers curling slowly against his shirt. "But if you're sure, then I'll keep doing whatever I can to help. I'll make all the bread you can eat and incense you can burn, and I'll make that cloth sheet-sized if you need it."

A faint smile tugged one corner of his lips, and he lifted his hand to cover hers. "Thank you," he said, not trusting himself to say anything more.

Cora stood without releasing his hand, seeming reluctant to break from him. "Good night, Thomas," she said in a quiet voice.

"Good night," he answered. He tensed reflexively as she leaned toward him and pressed a long kiss to his mouth, his grip on her hand tightening. Her still-damp hair smelled of her floral shampoo, and he felt the soft brush of her exhale against his cheek. When she broke the kiss, she stayed near enough that he could hear her breathing, hesitating an inch from him and watching his eyes. He couldn't bring himself to move; he only watched her eyelashes touch her cheeks as she brushed another light, testing kiss over his lips. She retreated just enough to look him in the face, nervousness written on the crease in her brow in a silent question he couldn't hope to answer. She touched her lips to his once more, and Thomas found his fingers in her hair, allowing himself to accept the heat of her kiss. Once she let a soft, appreciative sound hum against his lips and opened her mouth to him, he was lost.

Cora woke up with her cheek pressed against warm skin, and a smile crept onto her face as she curled in a little closer. She let herself lay with her head in the crook of Thomas's shoulder and her arm across his waist, not quite willing to wake up yet. When she felt him begin to stir beside her, she opened her eyes to find him staring at her as though he didn't know how she'd gotten there. He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't seem to make words come out, and then he let his head drop back to the pillow, his free hand pressing into his eyes as he squeezed them shut.

“Fuck,” he sighed, the rare curse on his lips startling her into a soft laugh.

“You okay there?” she asked quietly. She let his arm free from under her head as he moved to sit up on his elbow, staring at her in disbelief.

“I—we—” he began, a flush rising in his face and his hand moving automatically to draw the sheet up over her half-exposed breasts. “I...shouldn’t have—that is, the—the ritual and the—my fast, I’ll have to start the fifteen days over, and we...we shouldn’t have...” He trailed off, looking down at her with those dark, suffering eyes, and he softened, reaching to tenderly cup her cheek. “Cora, I don’t want you to...someone like me, I...”

“What I’m hearing,” she cut him off, lifting up onto her hands and forcing him back to the mattress as she laid her weight on his chest, “is that today is a wash as far as demon restrictions go.”

Thomas hesitated under her teasing smile, but then he chuckled, his thumb brushing the skin by her ear as she bent down to kiss him.

25

Elton had not ever pictured himself having to drive an RV the wrong way down the interstate at a speed that made the engine whine, red and blue lights flashing in his rear view mirror and Nathaniel Moore hanging out the open side door with laughter falling out of him that was just a little too gleeful—but here he was. He supposed it shouldn't really have been a shock at this stage in his life.

He came close to slamming into oncoming traffic so many times he lost count, jerking the wheel so that he only barely scraped the side of the vehicle against the median strip and daring to glance back over his shoulder at Nathan.

“Are you going to do anything about them?” he shouted over the roar of the open door and the cacophony of sirens and angry honks surrounding them.

He caught a flash of Nathan's smile as he pulled his head back in the door to yell an answer. “But then they won't catch us!”

“God damn it,” Elton growled to himself, and he snatched the wheel as hard to the side as he dared, crashing the RV through the barriers between lanes and slamming his foot to the floor to heave the massive vehicle back

up onto the asphalt on the other side. He wasn't going to be able to outrun police cars—not in this sluggish rig. If Nathan had actually listened when Elton had suggested just the slightest bit of reconnaissance, they wouldn't be in this situation.

The actress's house itself had seemed quiet enough—the wide gated courtyard leading to the front door was empty, and only a few lights shone through curtained windows. There wasn't even much real security. Elton was able to pick the lock and break the few wards without difficulty, and the house was peaceful as they made their way up the stairs. The woman they wanted was sitting at a broad vanity in the bedroom, leaned close to the mirror to touch up the makeup around her eyes. Nathan bound her before she could rise from her stool and kept his eyes on the hallway while Elton worked. She played innocent at first, asking what they wanted, offering them cash from a safe in the closet, promising to keep quiet if they wouldn't hurt her—but Elton saw the change come over her face when he crouched down to look her in the eyes.

“You know why I'm here.”

From then on, she practically spit fire, swearing at him and calling him a number of creative names—mostly insulting his erectile function—so loudly that Nathan put up a barrier to muffle her voice. Electricity shocked Elton the first time he laid hands on her, almost knocking him off his feet, but his gaze went immediately to the ogham-carved pendant around her neck, and he broke the chain as he snatched it free and tossed it aside on the plush carpet.

The pristine white carpet went red in seeping pools, the stains growing and darkening along with the woman's weakening voice. Elton left her bound by the wrists with a spare belt and kneeling at the foot of her bed, balanced so that she remained upright with her head fallen back and her dress torn down the center. The fabric below the opening in her chest was saturated with blood, and the exposed muscle glistened around the periphery of the blackened remains of her charred heart. Elton left a smear of blood from his own hand on the stomach of his shirt, though it didn't help his appearance much to have clean hands.

Nathan had led the way back through the house, but the sound of voices near the front door had forced them to take the exit through the back—where they had found themselves faces to face with at least a dozen garden party guests holding wine glasses, each pair of eyes focusing on the

intruders with surprise that blossomed into horror at the fresh blood staining Elton's front. The house was so large, they hadn't had a chance of hearing their polite conversation through Nathan's barrier.

That was how they'd ended up with photos taken of them both and police cruisers wailing a few feet behind them, and it was likely how they were going to end up on the news. Because Nathan had been positive it was going to be easy.

The police easily gained on them, four cars forming a phalanx behind the RV as the highway split, the oncoming lane disappearing behind the tall hills. The street ahead of them became clearer the farther they went; it must have been closed for some distance ahead of them.

"Do you have any kind of a plan?" Elton called, but he got only laughter in response. He heard Nathan's hurried footsteps in the back and turned just in time to see him hanging from the open door with one hand, his other trailing a mist of fine powder from his fingers to the road.

From the tall rearview mirror, Elton saw faint sparks erupting from where the mist made contact with the front of the nearest cruiser, and the metal slowly began to deteriorate, red edges creeping back across the hood like a hole burning into a piece of paper. The hood disappeared into ash, exposing the engine beneath, and then the axle crumpled as the rot reached it, knocking the tires out of place and scraping the front of the cruiser into the asphalt. The car fishtailed, knocking the vehicles beside it with heavy thuds, but they pulled ahead and left their half-decayed partner trailing behind in a stream of smoke.

"I think we should stop," Nathan shouted back into the cab of the RV. "I have an idea."

"Stop?" Elton snapped. "Are you serious?"

"Don't you trust me, darling?"

"No!"

"Good choice," Nathan laughed. He ducked back into the door as a bullet shattered the nearby window, burying itself in the microwave in a burst of sparks. "You see, darling?" Nathan called. "They're shooting at me! You know how I feel about being shot at!"

"Maybe don't hang out the door, then! Fucking idiot," he added under his breath, glancing back into the mirror at the flashing lights of the approaching cars.

“Just pull over! I told you I have an idea! Unless you’re hoping to make it to Mexico before they crash us!”

“Jesus Christ,” Elton sighed. He let the gas pedal pull away from the floor and looked out the window as the RV slowed and a cruiser drew close to his door. The officer inside brought the microphone of his car’s loudspeaker to his mouth, commanding them to pull over, and Elton obeyed. He rolled the vehicle to a stop at the side of the highway and turned off the engine, then retreated from the vulnerability of the windshield to join Nathan in the back.

“So what’s the plan?” he asked in a low voice, and Nathan paused as more speaker commands warbled from the surrounding cruisers, demanding that they exit the vehicle with their hands raised.

“This was it,” he answered with a bright smile. “Now it’s more fun.”

Elton took a deep, steeling breath, his hand unconsciously moving to the other man’s shoulder and creeping toward his neck as though it might strangle Nathan all on its own.

“Your idea,” he said, “was to get us closed in by a squad of mundane police and arrested?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Nathan scoffed. “No one’s getting arrested.” He brushed Elton’s hand from his shoulder and slapped the blond’s folio of talismans against his chest. “Now get a move on—the last thing we need is news crews and helicopters and whatnot.”

“If I die by getting shot on the interstate because of you, I’m going to come back to life just so that I can turn you in to the Magistrate myself.”

“Don’t talk so sweetly to me, darling; I’ll get excited,” Nathan purred, straightening the taller man’s stained collar before stepping down out of the open RV door.

Elton set his jaw and followed his companion out, a slip of paper already between his fingers.

Sirens wailed in the distance, signaling the approach of additional cruisers sent to support the officers who now lay scattered across the road. Many of them were only unconscious thanks to Elton, but he didn’t hold the end of Nathan’s leash as securely as he liked to pretend he did.

“We need to go,” he said. “We can’t be here when they show up. And we can’t take the RV anymore—not after this.”

Nathan gave a dramatic sigh. "I suppose. Do you have a suggestion?" He perked up. "We could take—"

"We are not taking one of the police cars," Elton interrupted. He started back toward the RV and took the step up into the door. "Get your shit. We need to move."

With their hurriedly-gathered luggage in tow, Elton made for the red hills along the edge of the highway, but before they reached the end of the asphalt, Nathan put a halting hand on Elton's shoulder.

"Shouldn't we destroy it?"

Elton paused, glancing from the RV to the horizon to scan for any cars on the empty road. The sirens were too close—they had a minute; maybe two.

Nathan leaned in to him and slipped a small wooden token into his palm, and as he whispered the word "dife" close to Elton's ear, the grounding burned against his skin.

"Go on," he murmured. "Do it for fun. Just the once."

Elton looked down at the scrap of carved wood in his hand. Destroying the RV was the right thing to do—the circle burned into the floor was enough on its own to draw the kind of attention they didn't want. And he didn't have time to argue with Nathan. So he closed the token in his palm and spoke the word with his eyes on the weary-looking vehicle, sending a deep boom of flame from the undercarriage that licked eagerly up the walls to the roof. The metal siding of the RV wrinkled and drooped under the intense heat, and they had to retreat from the fire as the RV began to crumple and collapse in the center.

Nathan watched him with anticipation lifting his eyebrows, but Elton only passed the wooden charm back to him and picked up his suitcase.

"I don't see the appeal."

Nathan sucked his teeth at him and shook his head as he slung his own bag over his shoulder, carrying his wooden apothecary case under his arm and following the blond into the steep hills beyond the road. "I thought you were coming along so nicely."

Elton ignored him. They needed to put distance between themselves and the scene they'd left behind, and there wasn't even any forest to hide them. When the piercing sirens arrived behind them, Nathan took Elton by the hand and kept quiet as they slogged their way unseen across the dust, leaving behind the shouts of the police. Before long, they reached the

opposing lane, and without consulting his companion, Nathan released him and snatched a passing car to a halt, its tires screeching against the spell and throwing up smoke as they were dragged across the road toward the shoulder.

Nathan held the vehicle in place while Elton opened the door on a panicked driver and leaned down to look the man in the face.

“Just get out,” he said. The man’s eyes went to the dried, sticky blood covering the front of Elton’s shirt, and he fumbled to unbuckle his seatbelt without taking his gaze from it. Nathan tossed their belongings into the backseat and let Elton take the wheel, leaving the driver standing alone on the side of the road as they merged back into traffic.

They changed cars again as they passed through Santa Clarita, and then again on the outskirts of San Bernadino, finally ending up in a nondescript grey SUV as they headed into the Mojave. Elton frowned and stared at the emptiness ahead of them, ignoring Nathan’s insistence that it had been pretty fun, really, hadn’t it?

It was late into the night and past the Arizona border before Elton felt convinced that they could safely stop. The motel they holed up in was cheap and barely clean, but it was enough for Elton to be able to finally change his shirt and get under a hot shower. He wasn’t even angry at Nathan anymore—it wasn’t the first time they’d had to escape the police, and it wouldn’t be the last. At least it was simpler than dealing with Chasers. He slept soundly, grateful for having more than two feet between himself and Nathan for the first time in months.

In the morning, Elton had to wake Nathan up to get him going at a reasonable hour, turning on all the lights and jerking the blanket from him rather than fight with his drowsy complaints for half an hour.

“We need to keep moving,” he said once Nathan had sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“To where?” Nathan stretched his arms over his head and swung his feet to the floor, scanning the room for a coffee pot.

“I think it’s time we head back east. Thomas will need us to deliver him a victim soon.”

“I agree. I’ll be happy to see Cora again, as well.” He filled the pot from the bathroom sink and started the coffee brewing before bothering to pull on

a pair of jeans. “I’ll find us some new transport,” he offered, already on his way out the door before Elton could agree or not.

Elton tried to call Cora to let her know they were on their way, but the call went to voicemail, so he told her that way, instead. When they’d cleaned themselves up, disposed of their bloodiest clothing, and gathered their things, Nathan led the way through the parking lot and stopped in front of a silver-tanked motorcycle with leather saddlebags and an etched plate that read “Triumph” near the handlebars.

“No,” Elton said immediately, and Nathan groaned at him.

“Come on,” he said. “Look; it’s got a place for our bags. It’s good weather—don’t you want some wind in your face after being closed up in that thing for weeks upon weeks?”

“I can’t drive a motorcycle,” Elton said flatly, but his protest only drew a slow, devious smile across the other man’s lips.

“Lucky I can, then.”

“I am not riding from Flagstaff to Boston with you on the back of a motorcycle.”

“Well, then you can give driving a try somewhere near Missouri.” He took Elton’s suitcase from him and held up a finger when the blond opened his mouth. “Now darling, I feel that I’ve been very agreeable to your demands for several weeks now—don’t be unreasonable.”

Elton pressed his lips into a dissatisfied line and sighed through his nose—but even if the ride meant his legs pressed into Nathan’s hips and his hands on the other man’s waist, he had to admit that the rumble of the bike underneath him and the desert wind blowing his hair once they got back on the interstate wasn’t as bad as he’d expected.

26

Cora had three missed calls on her phone by the time she checked it in the evening. She idly paced Thomas's room while she listened to Elton's voicemail, one hand holding together the unbuttoned black cardigan she'd thrown on. Thomas had insisted on showering by himself, claiming that he had already made it exponentially more difficult to keep his thoughts clean for the next two weeks without adding that imagery to his brain. He purposely averted his eyes when he returned to the bedroom to avoid getting too good a look at her in his sweater.

"Nathan and Elton are coming back," she said, dropping her phone onto the bed. "They said they'd be here in three or four days since they're driving. I guess they're going to bring...someone? Do we just keep them here until you're...you know, ready, I guess?"

"I told Elton it wouldn't be that soon," Thomas sighed as he buttoned his pants and bent to take a fresh shirt from his drawer.

Cora crossed the room to interrupt him, wrapping her arms around his waist and leaning her head on his shoulder. He didn't hesitate so much to return her embrace, though his hands still seemed ginger as they came to rest on her back.

“It won’t be just us anymore,” she said into the crook of his neck.

“That might be better for me getting this ritual done,” he said with a quiet chuckle.

She leaned back from him with a smile, letting her fingertips linger near his collarbone. She traced the scar at the dip of his neck lightly with one finger. “How did you get this?” she asked, and he glanced downward as if he could see his own neck. “It’s in a weird spot. I noticed it back when we were doing the cleansing, and I meant to ask earlier, but then I got...distracted.”

Thomas reached up to touch the scar just above the silver chain of his necklace, his expression softening. He moved back from her to pull his shirt over his head and looked at the floor rather than at her while he answered. “It’s from a tracheotomy.”

“A what? Isn’t that the smoker thing?”

“That too, I guess. But they also do it when you can’t breathe. Fluid in my lungs, they said.”

“Oh,” Cora said with a sympathetic grimace. “Were you really sick?”

Thomas let out a quiet sigh. “After Claire...died, and I had to come to terms with the deal I’d made for nothing, and with what I’d done to her, I—tried to kill myself. Get it over with. But the rope broke, and I didn’t know Claire’s aunt was coming to check on me. She found me and called an ambulance.”

Cora wanted to reach out for him, but he seemed to be purposely distant from her, so she resisted. “Sounds like you were lucky,” she said softly.

“That’s too much luck,” he said. “One of those things I might have brushed off, but both?” He shook his head. “I realized that the demon wanted its thirty years out of me. It probably didn’t want me to be able to claim it hadn’t held up its end of the deal.”

“Well, I’m glad for it, at least,” she offered, and he faintly smiled.

“I am too. Recently more than before.”

Cora bit her bottom lip in a smile. “I’m...gonna go shower. Then we can have a real dinner before you have to go back to your blood beans again.” She hesitated at the bedroom door, reluctant to take the step across the threshold and return to their reality, but she just spared Thomas one more glance over her shoulder and entered the hallway with warmth in her cheeks.

Elton insisted that they get helmets after the first day riding, no matter how Nathan insisted he would be able to prevent them from having their heads erased on the asphalt in the event of an accident. He didn't say out loud how likely an accident seemed with him attempting to drive—which lasted only an hour or so before Elton admitted his lack of skill and returned to the back of the bike.

They made good time, and Elton enjoyed seeing the landscape gradually turn green again as they approached the eastern coast. Nathan rarely even stopped if not to eat—Elton suspected he was eager to see Cora again but unwilling to say it. They did speak on the phone on the second night, confirming that they were expected, and by the time they parked the bike in the yard outside the bleak colonial house, Cora had already prepared their rooms and rushed from the front door to squeeze them both in tight, leaping hugs. Thomas lingered near the open door, his greeting significantly more subdued as they entered the house.

“Just the two of you?” he asked Elton, shutting the door behind them as Nathan and Cora immediately made for the kitchen, already chatting.

“I didn't figure you had a place to keep a prisoner,” the blond said. “There's someone on the list who's up in Syracuse, so we'll go get him when it's time. Do you have a date?”

“I still need eleven days.”

Elton frowned at him. “You said two weeks almost a week ago. Did something happen?”

“I—had some difficulty. A lapse. I had to start my fast over,” he said quickly, seeming in a hurry to exit the conversation. “It won't be a problem.”

“A lapse,” Elton echoed. Cora's panicked call played in his mind, and he narrowed his eyes faintly as he glanced to the kitchen doorway. “What sort of lapse?”

Thomas followed his gaze and then looked back up at him with a tight frown on his lips.

“Christ,” Elton sighed. “Don't even say it. And don't tell Nathan,” he added, nodding toward the kitchen. “Unless you want the ‘if-you-hurt-her’ threat of your life.”

“It's not—”

“Any of my business,” Elton finished for him. “I've been in the way of your life enough.”

Thomas paused, his brow creasing as though he hadn't expected that answer. He looked back in the direction of the kitchen and then lowered his eyes. "I still have prep to do," he said quietly. "I'll be in the cellar."

Elton watched him disappear into the hidden trap door and let himself have one heavy sigh before going to join the others.

Nathan was happy to spend a few days exploring Salem with Cora, and Elton was happy for a few days without Nathan no farther than three feet from him at all hours of the day and night, but a cloud hung over them all made up of the knowledge that the people in the camps suffered while they were forced to wait. Another of Thomas's friends in Ottawa disappeared—Magister Hubbard's own assistant. Thomas hadn't said it, but Elton knew he must have felt responsible.

Anne passed them information as she found it out; she heard whispers of families captured whole by the Magistrate, witches afraid to leave their homes for fear of being charged with crimes and afraid to stay inside for fear of being taken in the night without warning. Her own cousin in New York had been taken, and a few mundane friends had vanished. Even Cora wanted to venture out of the house less and less, afraid of drawing undue attention to anyone in their periphery. How many more families must be living in fear?

Thomas kept to himself; he ate his evening meal after everyone else to avoid their uncomfortable gazes and spent most of his time in the cellar. He had been receiving packages every few days, the contents of which he did not share with his guests. At the end of the week, Cora helped him prepare his mixture of wine, poppies, and hemp, which he strained into drinkable liquid through the cloth she'd woven for him. She supposed it was handy that it had so many little mistake holes in it, then. He hadn't let her into his room at all once Nathan and Elton had arrived, but when he carried his narcotic-laced cup upstairs, he even locked the door. It was difficult not to touch him or comfort him when he looked so constantly tired and worn, but she didn't want to risk ruining his fast with improper thoughts—not to mention having to hear about it from Nathan if he caught on to the new development in their relationship.

"Do you know what he's doing in there?" Nathan asked her one day from the kitchen table, watching Cora knead a lump of dark bread dough as he stroked the black cat standing in his lap.

“He wouldn’t tell me, exactly,” she answered. “Not that I pushed very hard. But I saw in his book some of the things he needs, and...it’s not pretty. A bat drowned in blood, the head of a cat that’s been fed human flesh, a human skull, coffin nails—and I’m pretty sure it said something about using the sacrificial victim’s skin to line the circle. I think I’d rather not know what’s going on under my feet, you know?”

“He is bloodier than he lets on, isn’t he?”

“I guess so,” she said softly.

A bang sounded from the next room, and Thomas passed by them with a grim look on his face, letting himself out the back door without a word. Cora frowned after him through the nearest window, but he crossed the yard and disappeared into the line of trees without looking back.

“Is he always this friendly?” Nathan asked as Herman reached his little arms up and flexed his claws into his captive’s shoulder, arching his back under Nathan’s scratching fingers.

“Just about. But not talking a lot is part of his fasting, or preparation, or whatever—so he doesn’t mean anything by it.”

Nathan seemed skeptical, but he let the subject drop, pursing his lips to make a few soft kissing noises into the top of the cat’s head.

When Thomas returned a couple of hours later, his pants and hands were filthy and his brow was creased in thought, but he still only walked through the house without stopping, the sound of the heavy cellar door signaling his next disappearance.

When a few more days had passed, Elton and Nathan took off on their own again and headed upstate on their kidnapping venture. Cora expected it might take some time to track someone down and steal them away for a human sacrifice, but two days after they left, she heard the rumble of the motorcycle’s engine in the yard and looked out the window to see a middle aged man riding in a newly attached torpedo-shaped sidecar, his head lolling backward and his mouth half open but his eyes protected by a set of goggles.

“You drove him all the way from Syracuse like this?” she asked, taking an overnight bag from Elton so that he could haul their victim from the seat by his armpits.

“Better than listening to him the whole way,” Nathan pointed out. “Oh, set me free, who are you, what do you want with me, et cetera.”

“You guys are way too relaxed about this.”

“It’s for a good cause, isn’t it? And anyway, if we hadn’t brought him here, Elton would have stuck him on a pike or somesuch in any case. You should see how creative he is, my love.”

“Creative?” Cora repeated uncertainly, but Elton was already halfway up the yard with the limp load in his arms.

Thomas held open the cellar door so that the man could be brought downstairs, and Cora knew from the look on Elton’s face as he emerged that there wasn’t a single thing in the basement that he approved of. She tried not to think about the man’s fate as Thomas let the door drop above him—or the toll it would take on Thomas himself.

Cora sat with Nathan in the study while they drank coffee in the evening, though Nathan spent most of his time critiquing Thomas’s library. Despite the fact that she knew there was a—possibly still living—sacrificial victim in the cellar, things had seemed to settle. Cora worried for the people in the camps and those still being taken, but she comforted herself with thoughts of what it would mean when Thomas’s ritual was complete. Thousands of people, back at home with their families, telling stories of Magistrate abuses and injustices. Something would have to give, then. The Magistrate wouldn’t be able to keep its secrets anymore.

A heavy, scraping thump came from outside, and Cora leaned to peek through the curtains at the front step. A large cardboard box sat in front of the door, its carrier already vanished. She set down her coffee cup and made for the door with her lips pursed curiously. The mail usually arrived before dark. She pulled open the front door and bent to bring the box inside, but she paused as she looked down at the label in the light.

“Nathan,” she called, waiting the moment it took him to reach her. “This is addressed to you.”

“Me?” He took the box from her and frowned at the scrawled address. “So it is. That seems...unlikely.” He carried the box into the study and set it down on the coffee table. He ran his hands over its surface until he was satisfied it wasn’t warded, then began to tear away the tape. As soon as he pulled the lid open, a sickly smell poured from the contents, and Nathan’s hands stopped just above the open box, the blood drained from his face in an instant. A soft, stifled breath caught in his throat.

Cora leaned forward to see inside and drew her hands to cover her mouth, her scream dying before it could escape her. The box contained a

human head, its face turned upward toward the recipient in a slack, empty stare. It looked pale and sunken, the eyes softened and discolored, but Cora knew the dark ringlets that still framed what once had been a beautiful face.

It was Adelina.

Nathan stared into the open box for some time, numb to Cora's tight hold on his sleeve, and he slowly lowered his hands, fingertips gingerly touching his daughter's dark hair.

"Oh, Maman," he whispered, "kisa mwen kite rive? Kè mwen, ti fi mwen, pitit fi mwen—" He pushed the lid open further and let his arms rest on the edges of the box as though he might fall without its support.

"Nathan, I'm so sorry," Cora managed, but he didn't seem to hear her.

His eyes narrowed faintly, and he reached forward to pick a folded slip of paper from where it lay tucked against the side of the box. A simple note was written inside.

Meet me
43.256120, -74.437417
Korshunov

Nathan folded the paper again, slowly, and set it on the table. He stared into the box with his jaw set tight, and he moved to touch Adelina's hair once more. Then he gently closed the lid again and laid his hands flat against it.

"Cora," he said softly, his eyes seemingly focused somewhere on the rug ahead of him, "I wonder if you might be good enough to...watch over her for me. Until I get back."

"Of course," she said immediately, "but you're not going alone? This Chaser is—"

"Thank you," he interrupted, and then he brushed past her with a light hand on her shoulder, and before she could catch up with him, he was gone, the sidecar broken and abandoned in the yard and the red trail of his taillight following the roar of the motorcycle's engine.

Cora ran back into the house shouting Elton's name, and when she met him halfway up the stairs, she pulled him into the study by the front of his shirt.

"Nathan's gone," she said in a rush. "He went to find Korshunov. He..." Her voice failed her as she gestured toward the box, and she couldn't bring herself to look again as Elton opened it with confusion written on his face.

“My god,” he breathed. He stared for a moment, brow furrowed, before shutting the box again with careful reverence. “Where did he go?”

“There are—coordinates, I think, on the note—he went all alone, and—Elton, you can’t let him be alone,” she fumbled, wiping at her spilling tears with the ball of her hand. “You have to go with him.”

The blond frowned at her, then gave her a small nod, his hand squeezing her shoulder on his way back up the stairs. Cora took her phone from the loveseat and dialed Anne’s number.

“Can we borrow your car?” she asked as soon as the other woman picked up.

Nikita heard the whine of the approaching motorcycle's engine even from the depth of the forest. When it cut short, he scanned the trees for movement and focused his gaze once he spotted the distant figure breaking up the moonlight.

"Go," he whispered to the spirit lurking nearby him, and he retreated deeper into the wood to distance himself from his target. The faintly luminous creature drifted forward on slow, even steps that passed through the underbrush, the thin, transparent fabric of its white gown drifting breezily with each movement of its feet. The spirit's dark brown skin seemed to shimmer in the moonlight, its mass of black hair almost weightless. As it slipped away from him, the wide slit of its gauzy gown revealed a skinless back and pulsing organs open to the night air. A thin mist of rain softened the edges of the trees, enough to hide him from sight as he withdrew.

He waited for Moore to draw closer, waited to see the look on his face as he realized—as he saw his daughter, bright and ethereal and beautiful, beckoning him farther into the trees. That smug face blanched; Moore's hand laid against the nearest tree as though he needed it to stand, and his

voice carried his daughter's name over the faint hiss of the rain. He spoke to her in the language they shared, the spirit's hands reaching toward him and urging him a step closer, but he hesitated, and a sneer of contempt curled his lip.

“Korshunov!” Moore shouted in a hoarse voice. He scanned the trees, but he didn't seem willing to take his eyes from the spirit in the shape of his daughter for more than a moment. “You wanted me here?” Moore snarled. “You've got me!”

A rumbling moved the damp earth under Nikita's feet, and at Moore's gesture, two of the trees just beyond the spirit snapped and fell—but Nikita wasn't there. He kept his distance, circled slowly, trusted the spirit's soft call to hold the other witch's attention while he poured his oil into his hand. He waited until Moore was close enough to touch it, to pass his fingers through the vapor of her hair. As Moore rounded the spirit, mumbling softly, Nikita heard the soft gasp of despair as he saw the wet muscle and bone of her back, and he had his moment.

With Moore's back to him, Nikita approached as swiftly as he dared, and as the older man's head turned toward the sound, Nikita struck him—the crunch was satisfying under his fist, and blood poured freely from Moore's nose as he stumbled a step backward.

“Иди ко мне,” Nikita whispered in a hurried rasp, his extended fingertips stretching toward the blood that flew from Moore's injury toward his palm. Just a little—all he needed was a little. The red pooled in his palm, and he squeezed it tight between his fingers to smear it against the oil waiting there. “По моей воле, мора, разорвать галстук!”

Moore had focused on him again with a deadly glare, but as soon as the witch's mouth opened to spit out his curse, a burning red slashed its way across his forehead, and he wavered. He put a hand to his face, clawing at his own skin and panting out words Nikita couldn't understand, but he knew that Moore felt the same scorching in his skin that already burrowed deep into Nikita's hand everywhere the oil touched. Nikita repeated his incantation, bolstered by the shouts of pain from the other man, and he pulled, heaving against the same strings he'd stretched thin and snapped free from a dozen other witches before this one. Moore fell to his knees and then the ground as the skin on his forehead cracked and split, and Nikita struggled to keep patient and focused while the moth's tiny legs first broke free of the bloody flesh. Nikita saw the subtle blue flash on its soft body as

it flapped its wings to fly from Moore's wound and moved forward. The spirit, standing nearby, reached out a hand as though she meant to touch the small insect with one curious bloodless finger, but Nikita snatched it in his hand and crushed it to dust without hesitation.

The thin wisp of smoke disappeared into the rain, and Nikita turned back to face Moore's still body, his head buzzing. He'd done it. He had him. Nathaniel Moore lay helpless in the grass, waiting for whatever justice Nikita Korshunov chose to serve him. Nikita's reddened and burned hand trembled as he reached for the man beneath him, breath coming quick and shallow while he took Moore by the shirt and rolled him onto his back. The rain diluted the blood on the witch's face, running pink rivers down his temples from the broken skin just below his hairline. This man was nothing now.

Nikita took a long, thin knife from its place at the back of his belt and held it at the curve of Moore's jaw. He would take him back to Ottawa and leave him like a gift on Magister Hubbard's desk. He would get the recognition he deserved.

But as soon as the blade nicked Moore's skin, he jerked awake, and black eyes wandered for only a moment before fastening onto Nikita's startled face. Moore knocked the smaller man back with a forceful shove to his shoulders and snapped out a spell—but nothing happened. Nikita stood, coarse laughter falling from his lips in the face of Moore's panicked expression. He let a moment or two pass, allowing Moore to glance between his victor and his own powerless hand.

“What have you done?” he asked, and Nikita's lip curled with satisfaction at the tremor in the witch's voice.

“I'm not done yet,” the boy answered. He moved toward Moore again, clutching him by the collar to force him back to the ground and pushing the tip of the blade to his skin.

Moore fought him, one hand on Nikita's wrist and the other flat against his chest to keep him at a distance, and he ground out the word “san” from between clenched teeth in desperation. Nikita barely registered the heat of the other man's bracelet near his hand before a long cut opened the flesh of his chest from his shoulder to his hip, and he fell back to the wet grass with pain searing through him. He hastened to call the potoplenyk to seal his wound and stop his bleeding, the watery sprite darting across the skin of his

shoulder as he locked eyes with Moore. They both sat breathing heavily on the ground now, both watching the other in anger and disbelief.

“How?” Nikita demanded. “It worked! You were—”

“You couldn't fill a thimble with what you know about me, boy,” Moore growled, spitting the last word like a curse. He pulled to his feet unsteadily, and Nikita mirrored him. He caught Moore glancing down at the charm bracelet around his wrist and inhaled sharply. The beads and bits of bone were groundings, just like the girl's. Nikita's spell *had* worked—at least in part. He just needed to separate Moore from his tokens.

Moore squared himself between Nikita and the lingering spirit, who reached for him and brushed cold hands over his shoulder, urging him backward into the wood. He seemed conflicted, torn between facing Nikita directly and addressing his concern for this phantom wearing his daughter's face. It was the distraction Nikita needed.

“По моей воле, антипоко—возьми это,” he murmured while Moore's head was turned. The sprite rushed forward, the dark needle shape barely visible in the misty rain, and struck the skin of Moore's wrist, bringing his attention back to the Chaser.

Moore snatched his arm away and growled, “Dife,” fire spitting from his lips and charring the shadowy spirit. Such a simple spell—and he had to speak the word. This wasn't the Nathaniel Moore he'd faced back in Miami. When Moore turned on Nikita again, he reached toward the Chaser and called out another spell that sent Nikita back against a nearby tree, cracking his head soundly against the bark. The Chaser grimaced but pushed forward, his next words summoning the flitting, birdlike spirits that rose from the grass and lashed Moore's arms to his sides with razor-sharp threads. Moore still struggled, his eyes briefly glancing back to the tall spirit reaching for him. He tried a few different spells, but they must not have been the chosen few carved into his bracelet—his words were ineffectual.

Nikita took a step closer to him and reached down toward his trapped wrist to remove the charms himself, but he was forced to stop with one finger hooked under the thread. A tearing pain raced up his leg to his torso, ripping his skin open in a corkscrew around his body, and he fell to the ground before he could catch himself. Beneath him, a thin slip of near-transparent yellow paper disintegrated as it slipped from his collar.

“No,” he growled, and he was able to turn to face the trees behind him despite the pain and loss of blood. Strong hands took him by the lapels of his jacket and hauled him to his feet, slamming him against the closest tree.

“Let him loose,” the blond growled close to his face.

Nikita spat, landing a spray of saliva on the other man's chin. “ты же,” he said instead, and Moore gave a pained cry as the strands dug deeper into his skin.

Willis's lip twitched in irritation, and he pulled back his fist to hit the Chaser in the jaw hard enough to rattle his teeth. He dropped Nikita to the ground and plucked another paper from his breast pocket, and when he held it over the younger man, it seemed to fall apart into droplets at the blond's word, each sticky glob fastening onto the Chaser's already wounded skin and spreading burns like hot wax. The spirits holding Moore shrieked, echoing Nikita's pained cry, and Moore fell face first into the damp earth as he was released, the sprites escaping in a hurried whirlwind that disappeared above the trees.

Nikita pushed himself backward on the ground with legs that screamed their protests. He'd lost a lot of blood—his vision had begun to blur. As he saw Moore rise to his feet and steady himself only briefly against his blond companion's shoulder, he knew he needed to retreat. He couldn't beat them both—not like this. But he had one more card left.

“Иди ко мне домой,” he called, his shaking hand grasping the small, twine-wrapped eggshell in his jacket pocket. The tall spirit's head turned toward him, her gown shimmering in the rain, and with one last look toward Moore, the specter dissipated, swirling swiftly downward into the shell, which gave a soft click as sealed shut.

“No!” Moore shouted, but Nikita grunted out one last spell, and a sudden wind blew the rain sideways so harshly that it turned the air between them almost opaque. The vikhor lifted him under his arms and carried him from the wood too quickly for him to see the trees they passed as anything but a blur. When he was far enough away that the moon filtered through the branches uninhibited by clouds, he dismissed the spirit, allowing it to drop him in a painful heap near a fallen log. He sat and tried to catch his breath, the tiny potoplenyk working hard to seal the gashes in his skin before he fell unconscious from lack of blood. He'd lost again. He'd let Moore and Willis get the better of him again. But this time, at least, he'd dealt a blow

that Moore may never recover from, and he'd gotten what he wanted—as long as he left a trail, now his prey would come to him.

Elton left Nathan behind to circle the area, keeping his friend in his periphery while he hunted for signs of Korshunov. He searched the trees but found nothing in the time it took his shirt to soak through, so he returned to where Nathan stood with his shoulder leaned against a tree for support.

“He’s gone,” Elton said over the sound of the rain. “We’ll get the bike and keep looking. He can’t get far on foot.”

Nathan tapped the back of his tightly balled fist against the trunk of the tree two or three times with his eyes on the ground, considering. He looked like shit—his nose was swollen and something had torn his face open, and the rain had washed the blood all down his face, adding to the tears and scratches circling his torso. He seemed to struggle to catch his breath, but Elton couldn’t tell if it was from exhaustion or fury.

“I have to tend to Adelina,” he said after a long silence. “I can’t...leave her.”

Elton softened slightly and nudged Nathan’s arm. “Come on. I’ll drive.”

Nathan was silent the whole ride back to Thomas’s house. Elton wanted to ask him what had gone wrong, why he hadn’t torn Korshunov in half as soon as he’d laid eyes on him—but those questions could wait. He’d seen the spirit the Chaser had summoned. Having a vision of Adelina in front of him was sure to throw Nathan off his guard, which had obviously been Korshunov’s plan. It seemed to have worked. Elton was just glad he’d arrived before things had gotten worse.

Cora was waiting at the door for them when they arrived, and she fussed and touched and took Nathan with her into one of the spare bedrooms to help him get cleaned up and healed. Elton lingered near the door, only having a small shake of his head to offer Thomas when he peered curiously at him from the top of the stairs.

“So is he...Korshunov, I mean,” Cora said softly once she had her poultice mixed and had begun to smear it gently over the cuts on Nathan’s bare back. “Is he dead?”

“No,” Nathan answered. His voice was quiet and strained, and the weak sound broke Cora’s heart. “He did something to me.” Nathan lifted his hands, his brow furrowing as he examined his palms. “Something to my magic. I can’t feel the loa anymore.”

“What?” Cora stopped and leaned forward to look him in the face. “Is that possible?”

“I wouldn't have thought so,” he admitted. “But I can't...any spell I didn't have the grounding for, I couldn't...”

Cora exchanged a wide-eyed look with Elton and laid her hand on Nathan's knee. “How do we fix it?”

A soft, weary sigh fell from Nathan's lips, and he whispered, “I don't know.”

She hesitated a moment, then shifted on the mattress and returned to her careful work. “Well, one thing at a time,” she said gently. Nathan didn't answer, so she let the silence settle over them and focused on closing his wounds.

When he was as tended as he could be, he asked after Adelina. Thomas had taken what they had of her from the box and sealed her within a glass case from his cellar, and now she lay in the study, covered by a black silk cloth. Nathan claimed a bedroom and shut himself inside with her, and he didn't come out at all the next day. Cora and Elton spent the majority of the day giving each other worried looks, and when Nathan didn't turn up for dinner, they approached his door together, prepared to encourage or force him to eat something—but Cora stopped Elton with a hand on his arm as he reached up to knock. She leaned her ear closer to the door and pressed her fingers to her lips to keep her breath from escaping her as she recognized the sound inside. Nathan was crying.

Cora squeezed Elton's arm, shook her head, and walked quietly back downstairs with him.

28

Over the next day, none of them saw Nathan except in passing when he gathered scraps of food and coffee from the kitchen. He looked sunken and weary. Cora had heard his soft chanting when she passed by his room; she wished there was something she could do, but he never even looked at them when he came out. How long was he going to stay locked in a room with a severed head?

“I have to proceed with the ritual,” Thomas said, breaking the solemn quiet that hung over the kitchen table after Nathan's latest passing. “If it isn't tonight, we'll have to wait too long until I have another chance.”

“Do you need me to do anything?” Cora asked, but the look on her face gave away her reluctance.

“No,” Thomas answered immediately. “I'll just...need to be left alone. I'll take him to the place I've chosen.”

“Not the cellar?”

He shook his head. “Not for this.” He checked his watch, then pushed away his bowl and stood to leave the table. “I need to go. Don't expect me until morning.”

Cora hesitated, her hands fidgeting where they sat on the table. “Be careful, okay? I know that's dumb to say, but—”

“I will,” he said..

She almost got up, but then glanced sidelong at Elton, who seemed to be pointedly not listening, and the blond sighed.

“He already told me,” he said, and Cora rose from her seat to grasp Thomas in a tight hug. He returned it awkwardly, assured her that he wasn't going off to war, and then excused himself to fetch their unfortunate guest from the basement.

Thomas had kept the man asleep with special incense since his arrival at the house, and he planned to let him remain that way. Allowing him to sleep through what was in store for him was the last mercy Thomas could provide. He carried him through the woods to the old ruin his family had used as a ritual site for generations and left him resting in the grass against a crumbling stone wall. The trees were thick here, and the remnants of the old house were still tall enough to help keep his purpose from prying eyes, but in this case he wouldn't risk it. He set his small, carved chunks of tourmaline at regular intervals around the outside of the ruin, and once he placed the last one, a soft hum sounded in his ears as the barrier formed a broad dome over the area. He didn't have a chance of concentrating enough to maintain a barrier himself during the ritual, but this would be secure enough for his purposes.

The next step was preparing the sacrifice. Thomas laid aside a copper vase and crouched beside the man slumped against the wall. It took him two tries to get his needle into the thick vein at the crook of his captive's elbow, but he soon had a steady flow of blood pouring into the container. When it was full, he pulled the needle free and set the vase on a nearby fallen stone. He had already arranged the tall post and the stacks of dry wood piled up at the base; the only thing left was to add the victim. It was easier for Thomas not to think of him as a person—this man had an early death ahead of him before Thomas stepped in anyway, so this was simply a useful utilization of resources. He still frowned as he undressed the unconscious man, then hefted him up and strapped him to the wooden post. At least he wouldn't suffer, and Thomas wouldn't have to hear him scream.

The blaze from the kindling he lit grew quickly, engulfing the body of his victim in an orange and yellow glare. His skin reddened and split as it

dried, curling black along the edges and seeping fat in thick yellow rivers. Thomas kept the grisly scene in his periphery, watching for the moment the man's muscles stopped jerking and his heart gave out, but he tried to keep most of his attention on his present task.

He toed off his shoes and covered his head with the black veil from his bag before entering the space he'd chosen. With the tip of an engraved sword he'd ordered from Anne's shop, he traced a careful circle in the dirt within one of the adjacent rooms, then drew a smaller one inside. Within went a triangle, which he colored with stolen blood from his vase until the soil was thick and damp. He drew the little circles inside, one of which would be where he stood during the ritual, and carved out the labarum of Constantine in its proper place at the base of the triangle. It also needed to be wet with blood, but for this sigil, Thomas cut the skin of his own left arm and let the blood drip from his fingers to coat the symbol he'd drawn. Keeping a hand pressed to his wound to slow the bleeding, he returned to his bag to gather the candlesticks made of human fat and the crescent-shaped candlesticks to hold them, and he set them at the edges of the triangle with woven crowns of vervain at their base.

The man on the stake had gone limp and still, his skin prickled with boils and wet with blood and leaking fat. With a gesture of his wand and a soft incantation, Thomas put out the fire and cut the man free, his body smoking in the cool night air as it lay in the grass. Thomas set his veil safely aside and frowned at the corpse he'd caused, his stomach churning at how delicious the charred meat smelled after two weeks of eating nothing but blood, beans, and bread. With a sharp, purposeful exhale, he took his knife from his satchel and knelt by the body to do his work—carving long strips of burned skin away from muscle and piling them in bloody folds on the ground. Thomas held his breath while he peeled skin from flesh until little remained that left the man recognizable, then gathered up his bloody ribbons and carried them to his circle, taking up his veil to cover his head on the way. He laid the strips in as neat a circle as he could in the space between the ones he'd drawn, and he fixed them into place with the coffin nails from his bag. He stepped out of the circle and returned to the ruined body he'd left, turning the worn wood of his wand in his fingers as he stood over it.

“Sis insumatis.”

At his word, the corpse began to decay, the bits of remaining skin flaking to the ground as the blood and muscle disintegrated. The body broke and crumbled at his feet, turning slowly to dust until only the bones were left, and then even these deteriorated, and no sign remained of the man Thomas had killed except for a few wisps of dust in the night breeze. All that was left now were the more gruesome ingredients—the head of the cat fed human flesh, the horns of the goat who had known a woman, the human skull of a murderer, and the bat that had been drowned in blood. He laid these in their proper places along the ring of skin he'd made and drew the corresponding words outside of each, and then bent to pick up the copper vase of blood. He sprinkled droplets of the dead man's blood over the skull and animal parts and set the vase outside the space again. He stood back to check his work, then stepped out one last time to strip his bloody clothes and pull on the black robe he'd sewn for the purpose. He looped the iron pendant bearing Andromalius's sigil over his neck and picked up the thin copper disc etched with Solomon's seal, feeling as though they were a bit heavier than before. He walked the perimeter of the space he'd prepared with his censer in his hand, pouring smoke from the incense that Cora had made, and hung it from an old hook sticking out from one wall at an odd angle. Nothing left to prepare now.

Barefoot, and with his head and eyes covered, Thomas crossed into the circle and lit the candles at the apex of the bloody triangle. He lifted the disc in front of his face and shut his eyes to take one last breath, hoping it would help to settle him into the earth. It didn't.

“By Adonai Elo'im, Adonai Jehova, Adonai Sabaoth, Metra ton On Agla Adonai Mathon, the pythonic word, the demons of the heaven of God, I do invoke and conjure thee, o spirit, Andromalius—come!” He repeated the chanting words of the appellation of Agrippa, louder each time, until his voice was almost hoarse and his brow began to drip sweat, but no answer came. Thomas lifted his left hand, blood still dripping slowly from the cut he'd made in his arm, and held it with fingers spread in front of the copper disc.

“Behold thy devastation if thou refusest to be obedient! Behold the Pentacle of Solomon which I have brought here before thy presence! Behold the person of the exorcist in the midst of the exorcism; him who is without fear! Behold him who potently invocateth thee and calleth thee forth unto appearance, and prepare to be obedient unto thy master! Come!”

A violent wind almost whipped Thomas off his feet, but he held his ground, gritting his teeth against the hot, wet breath that touched his face even behind the protection of the seal. A chill ran up his spine, prickling the hair at the back of his neck and sending his stomach into a heavy lurch.

“Hemen-etan, chayajoth, aie saraye, cavajoth—I command thee by the Key of Solomon and the Shem Ha-Mephorash!”

The air around him stilled, but the damp heat lingered, and Thomas knew from the pressure threatening to burn blisters onto the skin of his fingers that the spirit had arrived. Its voice reached his ears, low and echoing as though the creature had more than one set of vocal chords.

“For what purpose have you summoned me, exorcist? You are bound to another.”

“I bring an offering in exchange for a service,” Thomas answered in a tight voice. “Your office, spirit, is to punish thieves and to return that which was stolen. I would have you return something for me.”

“What goods?”

“The North American Magistrate has taken countless witches from their homes and families in the prior months. They are in prisons and camps across the country, which I can name. I would have you return them unharmed and of sound mind to the homes from which they were stolen.”

A few seconds of silence passed by, but Thomas stayed still and waiting until the demon spoke again.

“Show me your face, exorcist.”

Thomas hesitated. He didn't dare remove his veil, but he wouldn't need to—removing the copper barrier between them would be all the demon needed to see straight through him. He lowered his disc slowly and kept it near his chest as the wash of heat flowed over him, swaying him slightly as he fought to stay upright. The spirit that stood before him looked like a man, tall and broad-shouldered, but its skin was ashen grey, and two pairs of long, curving ram's horns grew from its head. Straight white hair poured down its shoulders like the rapids of a river, spilling over its thick bronze chest plate and heavy greaves all the way to the ground. A pale, golden snake as thick as Thomas's waist encircled the demon's legs, its upper body held in the crooks of the spirit's arms and its forked tongue tasting the air while it watched the presumptuous human with one glinting silver eye.

“Humans are not goods which can be stolen,” the demon said, its blank white eyes looking down into Thomas's face with an intensity that made

him queasy.

“To steal—” Thomas began, pausing to swallow down a throatful of rising bile. “To steal is to take without legal right and without the intention to return. So these people were taken. You trade in human souls and corpses. They are the same as goods to you. I have given you a life—I ask your services in return.”

The demon watched him with an immovable stare. “You’re pushing your luck, exorcist,” it said, and Thomas thought he heard just a touch of wry amusement in its voice.

A flash of blue light made Thomas flinch, and when he focused again, a thin sheet of parchment held still in the air in front of his face, lettered with dark ink in a language no man was meant to read. He knew what it said. It was everything he knew about the prisoners without him having to speak a word, and the demon’s promise of their return. A scrawled sigil formed at the bottom as he watched, the demon’s mark drawn in scratches of pale gold. He felt the weight of an iron fountain pen in his hand and laid his protective disc at his feet, then dug the tip of the pen into the open wound on his left arm and signed his own name below the spirit’s. As soon as he was finished, the parchment split into two identical pieces; the demon closed one in its fist, and Thomas crumpled the other and pushed it into his mouth. The papery goatskin was tough to chew, but he’d swallowed such a contract before.

“Agreed, Thomas Proctor,” the demon said, and then it vanished, another wave of heat and nausea washing over Thomas and leaving him short of breath and on unsteady feet. He vomited almost as soon as he stepped out of the circle.

Thomas sat against the cool stone wall with his eyes closed for a while, waiting for his heart to slow and his stomach to settle. He needed to clean up the site before dawn.

29

Cora didn't sleep until Thomas got back to the house. The sun was almost up by the time he appeared at the far end of the yard, lines of dried blood coating his forearm and the weight of his satchel seeming heavy on his shoulder. She took his things from him as soon as he entered the house and helped him collapse into bed, then curled up beside him with her head on his shoulder and followed him into sleep.

She stirred in the middle of the afternoon and left Thomas under the blanket. She hoped she would see another open door down the upstairs hallway, but Nathan was still closed inside. She stood by the door and listened to his soft voice, scratchy from overuse, chanting the same prayers she'd heard for days now. She waited until he paused, and then knocked.

"It's me," she offered gently. "Can I come in?"

The door knob turned after a few moments, and Nathan opened the door for her and allowed her inside. Dark stubble shadowed his cheeks, and heavy bags had formed under his eyes. The glass case still sat on the low dresser, covered by its black cloth, and the pile of rumpled blankets stripped from the bed suggested that Nathan had been sleeping on the floor in front of it. He knelt down again once he'd shut the door, and Cora took a seat next to him and put a hand over his on his knee.

“It...seems stupid to ask how you are,” she whispered, and he snorted softly without smiling.

“This isn’t the way it should be,” he said. “To only send me part of her like this, and to not know where the rest of her body is, I...it’s more difficult.”

“Nathan, I’m so sorry,” Cora sighed.

He turned his hand up to lace his fingers with hers, and she squeezed his cold hand tightly. “This time is called *dernier priye*, or last prayer. For nine days, the person’s spirit is said to linger near their body, so the family prays to keep it from being used for bad purposes. I don’t know if...I don’t know that it will help this time.”

“Why not?”

“Korshunov had a spirit with him, that...it looked like her. I don’t know what he could have done to her, or how he...” Nathan trailed off, and he took a slow breath that shuddered softly as he exhaled. He reached up to take hold of the silver-wrapped turquoise pendant around his neck and closed it in his palm. “I tried to give her this, before she left, but she wouldn’t—she wouldn’t take it. If she’d had it, if she’d had a second chance against whatever he did to her—”

Cora moved closer to him and put an arm around his shoulders, allowing him to soften against her and press his forehead into the crook of her neck.

“I shouldn’t have let this happen,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“There’s no way you could have known,” she assured him, feeling the tight hitch in her own throat. “You can’t blame yourself.”

“I blame him. And I’m going to find him. And once I find him, I’m going to take my time. He’s not going to take a single breath he doesn’t regret being alive for.”

Cora held him without answering, and he straightened slowly after a minute or two. She looked up into his tired eyes and squeezed his hand again. “Do you...want me to go?”

“She liked you,” he said, returning his attention to the cloth-covered glass. “I think she’d be glad you were here.”

She offered him a small smile and settled down into a more comfortable position beside him, never releasing his hand as they sat together in the dim room.

For the next few days, Cora brought Nathan some coffee and breakfast in the morning, then sat with him for a while in the evening. She didn't have any words that would comfort him or real help she could give, but at least she could keep him company and keep him fed.

News came in through Thomas's contacts that a sudden mass of people taken by the Magistrate had come back home, seemingly by magic but without any known source. Cora and Elton heard him on the phone with half a dozen people over the course of the week, but not once did he take credit for the mystery miracle. He shared their relief that so many people were now free to tell their friends and loved ones about their mistreatment at the hands of the Magistrate and asked them to send more news as they had it, but he never even seemed to consider telling anyone that it was because of him.

"There's some sort of protest being planned in Ottawa," he told them over coffee at the kitchen table. He looked a little more like himself with a few full nights of sleep and proper meals behind him. Cora had even caught him smiling a couple of times. "And in Philadelphia, it seems like. Everyone knows what's happening now—and there might be enough people willing to do something about it."

"That was what we wanted, right? So it's good news," Cora said.

"They don't have fear and secrecy on their side anymore," Elton said. "Now we're just left hoping that people care enough to do more than save their own skin."

"People are good," Cora insisted. "I have to still believe that. This is a good direction. At least those poor people are out of those camps."

"At least," Elton agreed. He took a breath to go on, but all three of them paused at the sight of Nathan in the kitchen doorway.

"Mr. Proctor," he said softly. "May I speak with you?"

Thomas exchanged an uncertain look with Cora, but she gave him an encouraging smile, so he rose slowly from his chair and followed Nathan out of the room. He waited while the taller man hesitated by the front window, and he swallowed hard as Nathan turned those black eyes on him. Had he figured them out? Thomas had warned Cora that sleeping in his room was a bad idea, even with Nathan shut away like he was. They were sure to be found out, and this man—

"I don't assume you're familiar with Haitian burial practices, Mr. Proctor," Nathan said, cutting off his internal panic. "But custom dictates a

body be buried somewhere guarded for a year and a day following the funeral services, and I...transient as I am, you see, I..."

Thomas softened at the other man's creased brow and tense hands, and he nodded. He knew the empty loss and hopelessness Nathan must be feeling. "You're welcome to bury her in my family's crypt. You'd be hard pressed to find a better-warded tomb."

Nathan returned his nod, a touch of relief visible in his shoulders. "Thank you." He took a step toward the stairs, then paused. "And...well done. With the spell. I underestimated you."

Thomas just stared at him for a moment, not sure how to respond to being praised by someone like Nathaniel Moore. But before he could form an answer, Nathan spoke again.

"We'll discuss you fucking my apprentice while I was gone some other time," he said dryly. He was up the stairs again before Thomas could get out more than a stammer.

Thomas heard a dull slap from the kitchen, followed immediately by Elton's defensive hiss, "I didn't say anything!"

The Proctor family crypt was little more than four walls made of aging stonework, its heavy wooden door at the bottom of a short set of steps that made the whole thing look as though a small house had begun to sink into the ground. Its gabled roof was missing a few tiles, and the iron fence surrounding it was tinged green by years of soft moss. The gate creaked angrily when Thomas opened it, but the door opened smoothly at his touch, allowing him to take the steps down into the cool underground. He lit a pair of old lanterns near the entrance and stepped aside so that Nathan could follow him, the cloth-covered case held gingerly in both hands.

Nathan looked more alive than he had in days—he'd showered and shaved, and he'd dressed himself in black slacks, a white button-down, and one of Elton's black ties. He laid the box in one of the long empty spaces near the back of the stone hallway as Thomas directed him past the closed and dusty coffins along the walls. It was far too small to be a body—a stinging reminder of the brutality the woman had suffered. The others hung back, but Nathan assured them that Adelina would want them there. They listened while Nathan said prayers over the box, hummed a soft song with his hands spread flat over the black cloth, and when he went silent, Cora

moved forward and put a gentle hand on his arm. He squeezed her fingers and smiled faintly as he nodded at her.

No one but him really knew her well enough to speak, but Cora at least thanked Adelina out loud for being so kind to her. When they all filed out into the morning light, Nathan lingered, and Cora hesitated at the door to wait for him. She saw him bend over the box and press his lips softly to the cloth, then take one last, slow breath before he met her at the stairs and accepted her offered hand. Thomas shut the door behind them and crouched to scratch a small chalk seal onto the floor before they left the crypt behind.

Back at the house, Cora poured them all coffee and started on her bread dough automatically—it had become routine for her weeks ago, but at least now she didn't have to limit herself to the dense black bread Thomas was restricted to. The kitchen was silent for a long time, as though no one quite dared to start up normal conversation again.

"I'll be leaving," Nathan said with both hands settled loosely around his warm mug.

"You mean *we'll* be leaving," Elton corrected him. "To find Korshunov."

"I said what I meant." Nathan glanced between Elton and Cora, who had paused in her kneading to look back at him. "The order we meant to stop is all but stopped. Mr. Proctor's families are safe. A good portion of your list is crossed off," he added with a subtle nod in Elton's direction. "All as agreed. Now I have my own business."

"Nathan," Cora cut in, "you can't expect us not to help. Even if we didn't know Adelina very well, we know *you*."

"I appreciate the thought, my love, but this won't wait. I'll be better on my own."

"Even with what happened with your magic?"

"Don't presume I'm helpless," he answered sharply. He stood from the table, leaving his full coffee cup behind.

"But I can help you find him! I can use my mirror, and—"

"I can find him," Nathan said in a grim tone.

"You ought to at least have a plan," Elton interrupted. "Let's put an ear to the ground, see what we can find out, and then we can—"

"I won't wait while he has her locked away!" Nathan snapped. "You saw her! Trapped in that—" He stopped himself and gripped the back of the wooden chair with both hands. "Whatever he did, I need to release her."

“Nathan, that was an illusion,” the blond insisted. “What could he possibly have done to trap a real person's spirit like that? He must have done it just to get to you.”

“Would you take that chance?” he pressed. “If it were your child? Or your wife?”

Elton frowned, his arms folded across his chest. “No,” he admitted. “But you still need to be smart. He's going to count on you coming after him. Let's see if Cora can track him, and we can figure out how we want to proceed and leave in the morning.”

Nathan scowled down at the table and took a snorting breath. “Fine,” he agreed after a moment.

“I'll try right now,” Cora offered, and she abandoned her dough, wiping her hands on her way out of the kitchen.

“We all have reason to want this kid dead,” Elton said. “And even if we didn't—Cora's right. Neither of us is going to let you do this alone.”

Nathan sighed and pushed away from his chair. “I appreciate the sentiment, Elton. And Mr. Proctor,” he added, “thank you for your hospitality. For me and for my daughter. I'm too tired for colorful imagery, but you can guess what I have to say about Cora. I'm never quite so far away that I can't come back here. Do you understand?”

“I won't give you any reason to,” Thomas promised, though Elton could see the twitching of a frown at the edge of his mouth that suggested he wouldn't have justified himself to anyone but Nathan.

Nathan followed Cora upstairs, leaving Elton and Thomas sitting awkwardly together at the kitchen table.

“Will you come?” Elton asked after a brief pause, and Thomas shook his head. “But you know Cora will.”

“That's her choice,” he said. “It'll be her choice to come back if she wants, too.”

Elton hesitated a moment, then stood to take his coffee with him on his way out. “I hope she's good for you,” he said.

“Me too,” Thomas answered softly, and Elton caught the faint smile on his face before he left the room to start packing up his things.

Cora sat in the candlelit bedroom in front of her obsidian mirror for almost three hours. A few times she thought she would manage to focus on her target—she caught glimpses of a black sedan, or the scent of blood, or whispers in a gruff language she didn't understand—but every time she felt

she was drawing close, something stopped her. She was thrown out of her trance a dozen times, and she was starting to feel sick to her stomach by the time Nathan knocked on the door to check on her.

“He's doing something,” she told him, taking his hand to pull unsteadily to her feet. “I think he knows I'm looking. But I saw him driving, in a town somewhere—I think there was a college campus or something? It's all been the same place. I think...I think he's waiting.”

“Well,” Nathan said softly, “I'd hate to disappoint him.”

The three of them spent the rest of day preparing for their trip—Thomas paid to rent them a car so that a stolen one wouldn't draw attention, Cora packed up all of the supplies she'd accumulated in her weeks at the house, and Elton did some digging on likely places Korshunov may have fled to. Cora reassured Thomas that Nathan wasn't likely to maim him, and she didn't want her last night to be spent away from him, so she wished everyone else good night and curled up in Thomas's bed while he said his evening prayers. She slept soundly against his shoulder, though a weight lingered in her stomach at the thought of leaving him. It was almost a pleasant feeling, in a way. Maybe when all of this was done, she'd actually have a place to come back to—a person to come back to.

In the morning, Cora pulled herself reluctantly out of bed and stretched her arms over her head on her way down the stairs. The rest of the house was still quiet, so she put on some coffee and padded back into the living room, but something caught her eye through the open front curtain.

The bike was gone.

Frowning, Cora hurried back upstairs and knocked on Nathan's bedroom door. She knocked louder, and when she still didn't get an answer, she pushed the door open. The bed was made, the dresser was clear—there was no sign of him. She called out to him, just in case, but got only silence back.

He'd left without them.

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Dawn hadn't yet broken when Nathan dropped the kickstand of the Triumph on the asphalt outside the cemetery. The entrance was elegantly framed by a stone and wrought-iron gate in a gothic style, with the name "Forest Hill" fastened in thick medieval type above the driveway. Nathan left the bike behind and looped the small satchel he'd stolen from Thomas's house over his shoulder, then approached the gate and laid a hand on the lock.

"Déblotché."

The mottled brown jasper on his bracelet gave a mild hum, and the gate creaked open following the thunk of the lock. He walked around the winding path, past the small chapel and into the yard lined with graves. With hands outspread, he paced the rows of stones with slow, purposeful steps, waiting for the tingle of heat he needed. Graveyard dirt was easy to come by, if you knew where to shop—but for some things, nothing but earth from the grave of someone who died badly would do. And even if you happened to know of one, that was still no guarantee you would get what you wanted. Nathan needed the *right* someone. Some lingering traces of spirits only wanted to spare their own injustice from others, or they may have been compassionate sorts in life, only useful for more peaceful

endeavors than the one he had in mind. But some—Nathan paused at the end of a long row and ran his thumb lightly over his fingertips, sensing the faint spark there. Some spirits just wanted revenge.

He knelt in the manicured grass and brushed a hand over the worn carvings on the stone.

“Bernard Brook,” he murmured. “How would you like to give me a hand, Bernard?” A small smile crossed his lips as he dug his fingers into the soft ground, pulling the grass free of its roots and tossing it aside. Once he had a small mound piled up, he retrieved a glass jar from his satchel and filled it as tightly as he could with the dark earth. He twisted the lid shut and tucked the jar away, then rose up on his knees to reach into his pocket. Running his thumb briefly over the silver dime to wipe away some pocket lint, he placed it gently in the hole he'd made and covered it with the remaining dirt and discarded grass. Bought and paid for.

“Mèsi anpil, Bernard. I'll put it to good use.”

Nathan dusted off the knees of his jeans and made his way back along the path toward the gate. When he reached the Triumph, he opened one of the saddlebags and retrieved a long case that clinked softly as he set it on the seat. He took the cap from a marker inside with his teeth and held it there as he wrote the name “Bernard” on the lid of his newest jar. He placed it safely inside, nestling it between Maureen and Justin, and tucked the whole case back into the saddlebag.

He was going to have to do the best he could with his new limitations. Prayer hadn't helped—Kalfu's rhythm was out of sync with his. It was a twisting, unsettling feeling that Nathan didn't like at all. But his own disconnect was secondary in his mind to the task at hand. He had blood to spill before he worried about the state of his soul.

The motorcycle's engine was loud in the early-morning quiet, echoing through the tall trees as he weaved down the streets toward his destination. Korshunov was either bold or careless—Nathan suspected the former—and had left magic so thick in his wake that even without his seeking spells, now that he was this close, Nathan could almost smell it. The Chaser was leaving breadcrumbs. Nathan was happy to follow them.

He parked the Triumph a safe distance from his target, a squat motel just off the interstate that was framed on both sides by tributaries of the Mohawk River, leaving the bike on a hillside shrouded by a line of trees. Korshunov was down there—likely warded and barricaded inside his room,

lying in wait with a trap he expected Nathan to walk into. But the Chaser had changed the narrative now. He wasn't the hunter anymore. He was prey that Nathan was going to devour whole.

Sitting in the dewy grass with his compact apothecary case open beside him, Nathan swirled a jar of vinegar as he dropped a handful of rusted nails into the wide mouth. He watched the eddies of ochre dust settle in the liquid and set it aside with the lid fastened tightly. He hummed low in his throat while he picked the other ingredients he needed from his kit—some of Bernard's grave dirt, brimstone powder, red and black pepper, the shed skin of a moccasin snake, and a powder he'd ground together from some snakeroot and the dried bodies of a few spiders and wasps. He mixed all these together in a glass vial, then filled it to the rim with almond oil, corked the lid, and gave it several good shakes. He let it sit in the grass beside the jar of war vinegar and left them behind to approach the trees. The flat concrete roof of the hotel lay just beyond a narrow parking lot full of cars, and a few sleepy bodies were beginning to make the shambling trek to and from their vehicles with suitcases in tow. He was down there—perhaps still sleeping, or perhaps waiting anxiously by the window—but Nathan was sure he was there.

He scanned the perimeter of the building, estimating the size, then gave a soft, decisive hum and returned to his kit. He popped off the cork of his oil and held his thumb over the end to sprinkle a few droplets onto the jar of vinegar, carrying both with him back to the copse of trees. With the jar growing warm in his hand, he lifted it to his chest and shut his eyes.

"Seyè, ou menm Bondye ki gen dwa tire revanj lan, parèt non pou fè yo wè ki moun ou ye. Ou menm k'ap jije tout moun sou latè, leve non; bay moun k'ap pran pòz gwokolèt yo sa yo merite. Voye," he finished, and as he thrust his hand forward, the jar sailed past the trees and shattered on the motel rooftop, leaving a large splatter of gritty liquid on the concrete.

Nathan watched the fluid turn black as it was exposed to the air, as it crept farther away from the broken shards of glass and sank deep into the stone. He turned away and set about returning everything to his kit, packing away jars and vials and closing the latch on his wooden case while the jar did its work. While he loaded the case back into the saddlebag of the Triumph, people inside the motel—like Korshunov—were beginning to cough. As the liquid seeped through the roof and into their rooms, drop by tiny drop, they would choke, their airways coated with poisonous dust.

They would gasp and hack, struggling to breathe, and blood would appear on their lips for their trouble. While Nathan fastened the buckle on his saddlebag and ambled idly down the embankment with a cigarette in his mouth and his stolen satchel over his shoulder, the people inside were clutching their stomachs, doubling over in pain and struggling to make the choice between breathing and vomiting.

Nathan walked the front of the building, running his flat palm gently across every door he passed and leaving behind those that only offered him the sound of wheezing suffering. Close to the corner, he stopped, the cheap metal door hot under his fingertips with the hum of warding magic. *There you are.*

He took one more drag from his cigarette and flicked it away, then took a small vial from his bag and emptied the dark oil into his palm. He spread it over both of his hands and pressed them firmly to the door, smearing a line from the top to the bottom along the frame.

“Kite'm antre,” he growled, and with a firm push, the barrier cracked, and the door itself fell from its hinges, landing with a heavy thud on the cheap green carpet of the motel room.

Korshunov was inside, blood trailing from his chin as he fought to take breath, but he was still on his feet, still had the energy to glare across at his intruder.

“You’ll have to fly faster than that, little bird,” Nathan said.

The Chaser spit a mouthful of blood onto the carpet and took a raspy breath, and at his hissed word, Nathan found himself lashed to the spot, his legs immobile and wrists pulled forcefully toward the floor. The binding spell was weak, and it dissolved under Nathan’s well-practiced break. He tutted softly at the boy and took a step forward, forcing him to retreat farther into the room.

“Ranmase,” Nathan said in an almost pitying voice, and as he crooked his finger, Korshunov was dragged up onto his toes and across the carpet until he was struggling for purchase just in front of the other man’s placid face. “You have something that doesn’t belong to you.”

Korshunov spat out, “Отпустите!” with such spite that Nathan felt his hold waver. With a faint, momentary narrowing of his eyes, Nathan released the spell and allowed the boy to drop back to his feet. He watched while Korshunov reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and retrieved the eggshell wrapped in blue twine that Nathan knew instantly. It was still

sealed safely shut, but Nathan saw the tremble in the Chaser's fingers that suggested it might be crushed at any moment.

Korshunov didn't need to speak his threat. He only stared at Nathan with anxious rage in his white-blue eyes, still fighting to keep his coughing behind his lips. Nathan hesitated with his eyes on the fragile container, and he lifted his hands and took a half step backward, clearing the way between the Chaser and the door.

"Fly fast, now, little bird," Nathan murmured as the boy slipped past him without a word and disappeared out the door. He waited, listening for the rumble of the distant car's engine cranking and the skid of tires on asphalt. Then he dropped his still-oily hands to his hips and huffed out a sigh as he surveyed the room. That was easy enough.

An open suitcase lay on the still-made bed, and a handful of assorted toiletries sat beside the sink. A good start.

Nathan crouched over the small puddles of bloody saliva Korshunov had left on the carpet, then took a scrap of white cloth from his pocket and pressed it to the floor, soaking up every bit of fluid he could. When the fabric was satisfactorily reddened, he wadded it up and tucked it into one of the little empty jars that rattled in his satchel, sealing it tightly inside. He rose and moved toward the bathroom counter, brushing aside travel-sized toothpaste and a razor and picking up the used toothbrush. He inspected it a moment, considering, but he kept it in his hand as he continued his scan. The comb was better—a few dark hairs still clung to the teeth. He pulled them free and sealed them in a plastic bag along with the toothbrush. He dug through Korshunov's suitcase, picking up shirts and spare ties, all unfortunately freshly washed. He found one undershirt that still smelled like sweat and folded it into his bag, then abandoned the rest of the clothing. A glass vial tucked into a side pocket caught his eye, and he plucked it up, turning it in his fingers to inspect it. He pursed his lips in interest and pushed the vial into his jeans pocket.

With the room picked clean, Nathan returned to the front door and ran his gaze across the path between the entrance and the parking lot. A small gathering of silt near a drain had been disturbed by a pair of escaping dress shoes. Nathan squatted down beside it and scooped up some of the damp dirt into a separate little jar, screwing on the lid as he stood. This was plenty.

Nathan walked back around the building, leaving behind the lingering sounds of coughing and choking that still sounded from behind the closed doors. The bystanders weren't likely to die—he hadn't wanted to risk killing Korshunov himself. But their pain barely registered to him as he made his way back up the sloped hill toward his bike. The only thing that mattered was that now he had Korshunov's personal concerns—and a hundred new ways to make him suffer before the end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.S. likes to write about what makes people tick, whether that's deeply-rooted emotional issues, childhood trauma, or just plain hedonism. She tells stories about real people who live in less-real worlds full of werewolves, witches, demons, and the occasional alien.

Born in the South, T.S. started writing young and now writes while working as a Paralegal. In her down time, she plays video games, watches true crime documentaries, and spends time with her husband, daughter, and two cats.